

My Dear Sister

London
Nov. 17. 1781.

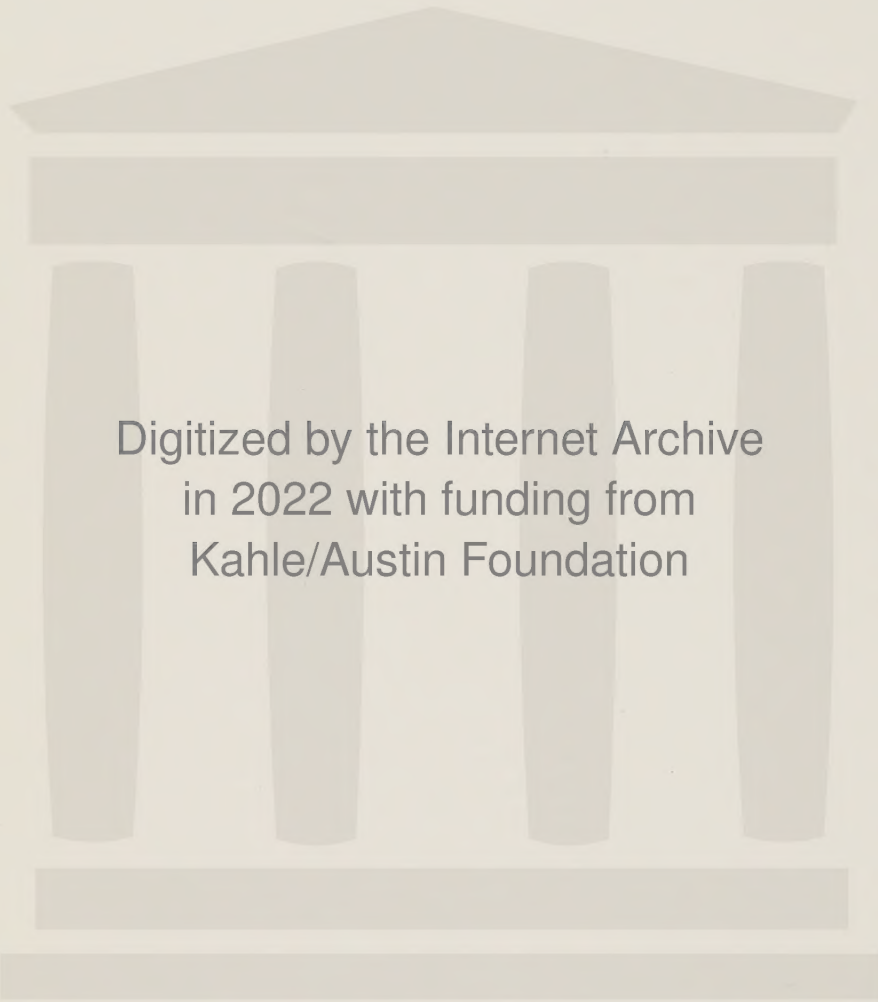
My Dear Sister

The Affection with I have felt
for you, ever since I had the pleasure
of your company at Mr. Dwyer's,
with many thanks to be
from the friends of your
Cousin, that
the Lord
not come
for that
your desire
that Perfect Love
the door! How soon may you find the
fulfilling of that word, "All things are



The story of John Wesley and the women in his life

BY MALDWYN EDWARDS



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MY DEAR SISTER





*Frontispiece: John Wesley at the
time of the foundation of the
Methodist Societies.*

MALDWYN EDWARDS

MY DEAR SISTER

with 75 illustrations

The story of John Wesley and the
Women in his life

Dedicated to

CHRISTOPHER and TIMOTHY

With love

Penwork (Leeds) Ltd.
224 Wilbraham Road
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The original preface to this book has now to be re-written since Dr. Edwards' death on the 14th October, 1974. He would want us to complete the references made to those who helped him.

As with all his work, he acknowledged that without his wife's constant encouragement it could never have been achieved, especially at times when other duties threatened to swamp the whole project. He referred to Mrs. Margaret Radford and the Rev. Ian Whyte 'for earlier work in typing from my quasi-indecipherable writing', and to Mrs. Muriel Roberts 'for typing the whole book with meticulous accuracy and skill'. We must now add how indebted he was to Mrs. Rhona Mair who, latterly, put in many hours on typing a large amount of fresh material and re-typing many pages where corrections had to be made.

Dr. Edwards wrote: 'No study of Wesley can possibly be complete without an understanding of his relations with the many women in his life. Astonishingly there has never been a book, to my knowledge, dealing with this side of his life. To engage in the research and to write the book, has, therefore, been for me a happy and satisfying labour.'

B.G.

The Editor wishes to thank the Rev. Dr. John C. Bowmer M.A. B.D. for invaluable notes, and for help in checking the references. He also wishes to thank his secretary, Miss Grace Shenton for preparing the typescript.

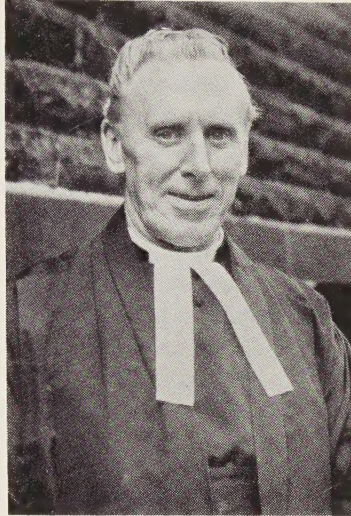
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We wish to thank Jill & Brian Greet for reading proofs.

Pictures of many of the women recorded in this book are not available, and the pictures which are available often shown the subject in old age. We ask the readers to use their imagination to picture them at the time when John Wesley knew them.

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MEMORIES OF MALDWYN : by the Rev. Dr. K.G. Greet,
President of the Conference of 1980.



As I take up my pen to write this introductory tribute a queue of memories jostle one another in my mind pleading to be included. There will be no space for them all but let me begin by recalling my first glimpse of Maldwyn Edwards. I attended an evening service in the Bristol Central Hall. It was the day in 1939 when war was declared. A great congregation had gathered to hear the newly-appointed minister. He came striding down the aisle towards the pulpit, and he strode straight into my heart.

Many who read this book will hear again the compelling voice of the author, they will recall the apparently effortless flow of well — formed sentences, the noble brow, the wide eyes so full of intelligence, the passionate conviction and the dramatic gestures. Maldwyn Edwards was the living embodiment of the assertion that 'He maketh his ministers a flame of fire'.

A few years later when I was myself a minister in South Wales, I invited Dr. Edwards to speak at a circuit rally. He took the place by storm. At the end of a mighty oration about

the God who both goes before us and follows after, his wide-eyed gaze swept the crowded gallery. 'It may be', he said, 'yes, it may be there are a few stragglers here. Well, God is before you and God is behind you. Hallelujah! Amen!' As he subsided into his chair there was an electrifying silence as if for a moment time had been suspended for eternity to peep through.

On another unforgettable occasion at the World Methodist Conference he was called on to speak at a crowded meeting. The proceedings had been painfully protracted and it was 9.30 p.m. before the speaker got to his feet. The audience was tired and restless. Maldwyn Edwards, nothing daunted, seized this formidable situation and transformed it into a tour de force. For forty minutes he held his hearers spellbound as he talked with uninhibited enthusiasm about the inmates of the Epworth Rectory. The final dramatic sentences brought tumultuous applause and a standing ovation that seemed as if it would go on all night.

In all his public utterances one got the impression that one was observing the overflowing of a richly-stored mind. He once told me that he never wrote his sermons down until after he had preached them and only then if they seemed good enough. But his gifts of oratory were matched by his skill as a writer. He produced upwards of twenty volumes. Many of these were concerned with Methodism and the Wesleys, and perhaps the most significant were the three books on the social and political aspects of various phases of the Methodist Movement.

Maldwyn Edwards' ministry was unusually varied. He served as tutor, missionary, departmental secretary and District Chairman. He was least happy during his three-year sojourn in the then Methodist Department of Christian Citizenship. The constant travel and the irksome administrative chores of the Westminster office provided a mixture which he found less than congenial. Nevertheless during that brief period he demonstrated his gift for keeping open a window on the world and bringing the insights of the gospel to bear on contemporary events. Theology and ethics were always held firmly together in his thinking.

Essentially Dr. Edwards was an evangelist. He was academically brilliant and might have devoted himself exclusively to scholarship, but the call to preach was determinative of all else. In the pulpit, on the platform and in the open air he

pleaded the cause of Christ and eagerly sought a response from his hearers.

As the years went by his fame travelled abroad and he journeyed often to the U.S.A. His travels also took him to India and, as Cato lecturer in 1957, to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. His wife shared in some of these demanding journeys at considerable cost to herself.

One of the most engaging features of this most companionable of men was his zest for living. He enjoyed almost everything he did. His mode of expression was often the language of exaggeration but this was used in such a way that the truth was magnified rather than distorted. Once, for example, motoring round and round a vast roundabout in Birmingham trying in vain to find the right exit, he exclaimed dramatically 'Oh Kenneth, I think we are here to all eternity'. Incidentally, driving with Maldwyn was always an experience. On the way to a meeting, when impeded by an innocent little lorry-driver trying to pilot his vehicle through a narrow space, he would cry out 'Just look at that great big fat ugly man at the wheel of that absurd horrible green wagon'. Then, the offending driver having moved courteously aside, he would be thanked by a cheery wave and a warm thankyou!

Maldwyn was a man who needed affection and gave it unstintingly. He operated from a base of secure love at home and within the warm embrace of his remarkable family. He took a childlike delight in simple things. I recall how he discovered the lever on an American car which operated the automatic windows. With boyish enthusiasm he played with this 'staggering invention' all through our journey.

The Wesleys never had a more devoted champion than Maldwyn Edwards. He was an ecumenical man, but his first love was the great Methodist tradition of which he was so able an exponent. In his so-called retirement which was all-too-brief, he became the warden of John Wesley's Chapel in the Horsefair at Bristol. Nothing could have been more appropriate. As he welcomed visitors there from all over the world some observed that, with pale aquiline face and long silvery hair, he had come to resemble the great evangelist whose shade seemed almost to walk with him in those hallowed precincts. It was while he was lecturing in the old chapel that he was suddenly struck down. And within a few hours God had raised him up to that heaven which never seemed more than a hand's breadth away.

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INTRODUCTION



Reputed portrait of John Wesley as a boy of 12.

It must be confessed that for many people John Wesley himself is a shadowy figure. How then can any interest be whipped up in those women who are far more shadowy still? Even their very names are unknown to the vast majority today. The point is valid but not decisive. Whatever else is not known about Wesley, all agree that through his life and ministry Britain underwent a spiritual revolution that had enormous social consequences, and whose impact was felt in time throughout the whole world. He was the father of Methodism which has spread into ninetyseven countries and with a community membership of nearly forty million people. In numerical strength and influence it ranks as one of the greatest of all world Churches.

Everything, therefore, about such a man is of interest. Certainly nothing is more important than his relation with men and women. In my book "The Astonishing Youth" I discussed Wesley as a trusted leader inspiring affection in the preachers who knew themselves to be his sons in the gospel.

But the astoundingly large number of women friends whose names spatter the Journals and the Letters show that it was women as well as men who came under his spell. They were drawn to him as a man quite apart from the fact that

Epworth Village: where it all began.



they knew him as a man of God. In so great a number the ones we know best are those who wrote to him and regularly received letters from him. Sometimes they kept diaries and journals which were printed, and sometimes others wrote memoirs of them. But even so the numbers are too great for them to be listed in this story of a few women friends.

When so very many have had to be excluded what has been the principle of inclusion? The mother and sisters speak for themselves. So also do those whom he might have married, for you cannot write of Wesley's partiality for women without dealing with him as the reluctant lover. Then the Countess of Huntingdon demands attention because hers and John Wesley's life spans were virtually equal and either as friend, supporter or violent critic, she played a vital part in the story of the Methodist Revival.

Controversy, however, may arise in my selection of those women who helped him in his labours throughout the country. So many others might seemingly be equally well included. They are in any case not really known except to students. But each was important in Wesley's day in the work of Methodism, and each had a distinctive role in Wesley's life.

Hannah Ball had to be included because she was the originator of Sunday Schools, and Wesley later came to recognise their overwhelming importance and in the last decade of his life he steadily promoted their growth. She was also a key figure in the growth of Methodism in and around High Wycombe. Preachers came and went annually but she

remained and could not alone sustain the work of the Methodist Societies but act as a liaison between John Wesley and the preachers stationed in that area. He who knew his preachers so well was not afraid to make her his confidant and both to give and receive advice.

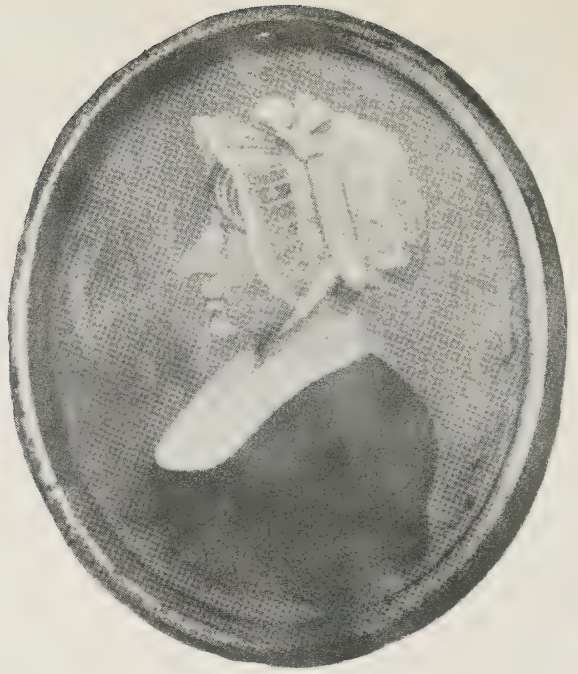
Mary Bosanquet could never be omitted. She is one of the great figures in the whole story of the Methodist Church in Great Britain. The work she began in Leytonstone was continued in the vicinity of Leeds. The community, of which she was head, had its religious, social and educational aspects. Finally, on marrying the great John Fletcher, she moved to Madeley and after her husband's death continued to sustain the weeknight fellowship classes for thirty years. Only death cut short her work.

I chose Nancy (Ann) Bolton not only because she did the same sort of work and had the same sort of commanding influence in Witney that Hannah Ball exercised in High Wycombe, but because *prima facie* evidence would suggest that of all his women friends it was Ann for whom he had a special affection. He was sensitive to her womanliness and made it plain in his letters.

Elizabeth Ritchie travelled with him more than any other woman in his travels in Yorkshire and the North East. There was a great difference in age, and she more than any other woman felt and behaved as though she was his daughter. It was Elizabeth in her early thirties who was able to be with him in the closing months of his life and actually to be present with him continually when he came back to City Road as a dying man. None can rob her of her distinctive place as the one who acted as a daughter to the man who had no children.

Let these women serve as representatives of that very large company of women to whom Wesley wrote and whom he visited as occasion offered. Each had her own appeal and made his labours lighter. His favourite form of address was "My dear sister", and surely no man ever had so many sisters.

Whatever else you say of Wesley, do not call him lonely. He had no home life but he lived in the society of women whom he only saw rarely but whose friendship through correspondence he kept in good repair. If they needed him he certainly needed them. In their womanly graces they supplied what else he would have lacked. You cannot understand John Wesley without knowledge of the women in his life.



*Suzanna Wesley in middle
age, and as an old lady.*





Since Annie E. Keeling's EMINENT METHODIST WOMEN (1889) this has been used as a portrait of Suzanna Wesley. The Standard Edition of the JOURNAL (1909) gives reasons for believing that it is actually a picture of Lady Rodd, the sister-in-law of Charles Wesley's wife.

Let it be said at once, John Wesley had a great fondness for women and they were certainly attracted to him. Alexander Knox said that the brothers Wesley had an irresistible fascination for the female sex, and in John's case the reason is not hard to find. He was immensely good looking, well spoken, and a thousand miles removed from the dry pedant. His richly stored mind was at the disposal of any person whom he met. And what he said was uttered with lively forcefulness. Best of all he was genuinely interested in the people he met. Always, of course, he was interested in their health, but also in their occupations and interests. He wanted to know what made them tick. Nothing is so flattering to a person than to know he matters to the one whose company he shares. A bore has been defined as a man who talks about himself when you want to talk about yourself, but equally it is a person interested in himself when you want him to be interested in yourself.

But women had an extra fascination for him, and he wrote three times as much to them as he did to men. He was keenly susceptible to their beauty and more so if it was combined with wit and sparkle. But it is fair to say that most of all he rose instinctively to a woman of unaffected goodness. He wasn't deceived by words, but when he saw grace in graciousness he capitulated. One might say he admired practical piety if the words were not so hard and angular. If a woman had love for God and man, then for John Wesley, she was lovely!

He was never short, therefore, of women friends. It is just as wrong to think of him as the lonely horseman not even helped by an understanding wife, as to think of him as the

austere and detached leader of men. He was never short of female company from birth to death, and for the men and women who followed him he was always the father of the family.

Even so as far as women were concerned he could certainly be exasperating. His sisters even when they expressed their great love of him, would wistfully ask that he would write more often, or that they might see him more frequently. Emily, who had spoken of John as “my intimate companion, my counsellor in difficulties, the dear partner of my joys and griefs”, could be more salty and forthright than any of them when occasion arose.

But always it was the same, John simply could not understand what they were talking about. As with his sisters — so with his women friends — could they not understand that he had work to do and the work required haste? Sometimes he would use attack as the method of defence and chide his sisters or his women helpers for not being more completely identified with the cause in hand.

Consonant with this somewhat hard and imperceptive attitude, he often seemed unable to enter fully into ordinary human emotions in time of sickness, disappointment and bereavement. His spoken or written comfort to the bereaved so often showed him unaware of the depths of personal sorrow. Time and again when writing to women about the loss of a child or a parent or a husband, he tries to console them with the thought that it might be a hidden mercy since now they can give themselves more completely to God and His service. A case in point is the letter he wrote to his favourite sister, Martha, on November 17 1742, — “I believe the death of your children is a great instance of the goodness of God towards you. You have often mentioned to me how much of your time they took up. Now that time has been restored to you, and you have nothing to do but to serve our Lord without carefulness and without distraction till you are sanctified in body, soul and spirit”.

Just as aggravating was the incessant need to be on the move. It was all summed up in a famous remark of Dr. Samuel Johnson, a great talker who loved a great talker. He said, “he could talk well on any subject”, but then remarked disgruntledly that “he was always obliged to go at a certain hour”. John, himself, was well aware of the cruel limitations his work imposed on his time with friends. In a letter, for example, to Ann Bolton (May 18 1779) he complained of “that cruel

something or other which always interposed and defrauded me of your company". This was just as true of other women to whom he wrote regularly and whom he desired to come and meet him, if whilst in their vicinity he was still not near enough to come and see them. Sometimes, as with Elizabeth Ritchie, he asked those who were able, to come on his journeyings with him, when he was in their part of the country. It was a gallant attempt to keep valued friendships in good repair. We owe the volume and content of his correspondence to the very fact that a man who is always going on to the next place must of necessity use letters as his go-between.

There were those also who felt that he welcomed their friendship but not their criticism. Sarah Ryan, Sarah Crosby and Mary Bosanquet did not hesitate on occasion to say that he was susceptible to flattery, and liked it. Joseph Benson, the Kingswood Classics master when leaving to teach at Trevecca College, wrote in a letter to Wesley that he (John Wesley) could not endure contradiction, that he favoured those who flattered him and ignored friends who were too modest to express their affection and yet sufficiently bold to offer sensible and constructive criticism. In his reply, Wesley blithely acknowledged that he had been told a hundred times, "You love those that flatter you and hate all that deal plainly and honestly with you". But he roundly denied the accusation. "What man did I ever love like T. Walsh? What woman do I now regard like Miss Bosanquet? And what human creatures have dealt so plainly and honestly with me? What preacher now deals so plainly with me as John Fenwick and whom do I love and trust more?"

In the case of all those friends who pointed out this so-called weakness, Wesley took no offence. His friendship with Joseph Benson as with Sarah Ryan, Sarah Crosby and Mary Bosanquet, remained unbroken to the end. The point to be made is that Wesley never lacked the friendship of women from the beginning to the end of his life.

A man's best friend is his mother: some would maintain in John Wesley's case that there was a mother fixation and that he never seriously wooed a woman till after his mother's death. Susanna did know "Jacky" as "a brand plucked from the burning" after his near escape from death when the Rectory was destroyed by fire in 1709. From that date she believed him to be spared for some special reason and in her many letters to him showed how ready she was to share his confidence and offer him advice.



Susanna Wesley in her middle years.



Even so she wrote just as regularly to her other two sons, and her eldest child Samuel, who became the financial prop of the whole family, was perhaps the one who had a special place in her affection. John left home for Charterhouse when he was eleven years old, and six years later went on to Christchurch, Oxford. Apart from rare visits and a period rather less than two years as his father's Curate at Wroote, he and his mother were never together until she came to the London headquarters of Methodism at the Foundery two years before she died. No mother was less possessive and no son less demanding. When he sought his widowed mother's approval to go out to the new colony of Georgia as chaplain, she cheerfully assented. "Had I twenty sons I should rejoice they were so employed though I should never see them more".

Epworth Rectory.

There was no fixation but she was, during her lifetime, a major influence on his life. Towards the end of her days when Samuel junior was so shocked by the emotional excesses of the Revival, Susanna discerned its abiding importance, and with astonishing resiliency she decided to commit herself to this untried road. Once installed at the Foundery she attended the Sunday worship and the weekday classes. Take a classic example of her readiness to commit herself to some new activity, provided she believed the new was better than the old. A lay preacher, Thomas Maxfield, had preached at the Foundery and was not only irregular but unauthorised. John Wesley came post haste from Bristol, "Thomas Maxfield has turned preacher I find". The words were ominous, but Susanna was not disturbed. "He is as surely called of God to preach as you are — hear him yourself". To his credit John agreed and confessed, "It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good". Through her influence at a critical moment he accepted so early the full time and part time use of lay preachers.

It was not his mother who kept him from marriage: she was never asked. But it is true that until her death in 1742 she was the one to whom naturally he would turn, and after her death he was caught up in the turbulent first years of the Revival. So in that sense she may have been a main factor in delaying his decision until a time in middle life when his own fastidious temperament made so decisive a step more difficult to take. He did not trust his own immediate reactions but sought to know God's will in it. This was not calculated to make him adventurous in matters of the heart. This reluctance was strengthened by his Oxford reading of Patristic literature

and the knowledge that for Paul, as for the early Fathers, celibacy was held in great honour. As V.W.H. Green has said, he was tempted to place chastity before marriage.

The conclusion must be that Susanna did not tie him to her skirts. She never sought to cramp his style either in the matter of his women friends, nor in the nature of his work. He was free to make his choice. But she never ceased to be the woman who most helped to shape the course of his life and whose memory never faded.

John was not only fortunate in his mother but also his sisters. It was their misfortune that whilst they were of necessity only on the periphery of his life, he was more nearly at the centre of theirs. From their letters to him it is evident that they not only loved him but desired far more of his company.

None could say that he ever failed them where protection or material assistance was needed. None of them could doubt his love or question his generosity. But they depended on him far more than he depended on them. In the case of six sisters he had their undeviating love and loyalty to the end of their days. Emily actually came to live at the Foundery in 1740 upon the breakdown of her marriage, and in 1743 when West Street Chapel was taken she had apartments there. So for thirty years in London John Wesley had the society and unremitting support of his eldest sister. She was virtually an unpaid Deaconess whose chief interest was to share in the work of the Society. It is worth noting that in 1771, the very year in which she died, Charles Wesley came from Bristol to live in London and to share in John's labours there.

Undoubtedly John's favourite sister was Martha, known to the family as Patty. It was she alone who survived his death but only for a few months. In a figurative sense she was always at his side and in her later years in Bristol and London she was especially close to him. When she died it was altogether fitting that she should be buried in the same vault as John. "Lovely and pleasant they were in their lives and in death they were not divided".

Even to catalogue the women in his life that John Wesley knew as friends would need a statistician. So nothing is more mistaken than to picture him as unfortunate in marriage and doomed to tread a lonely road to the end of his days. He had a host of friends and so very many were women. But amongst them all let his devoted sisters never be forgotten.



"Aug. 1st Sun. . . . about five in the afternoon I committed to earth the body of my mother, to sleep with her fathers".

THE COTSWOLD FRIENDS

M. } Friday Monday after 10th went out of town.
 A. } 22nd Friday April 14, 1725 Footman 420513⁰ 55
 Feb 8 not to be in vain!
 May 28 Friday

*John Wesley's Journal
 entry about Varanese.*

The solid proof that at no age would Wesley show the fire of a lover is demonstrated in the Cotswold idyll. When he first rode over from Oxford to Stanton in April, 1725, he was twenty two years of age. So great an impression did the beautiful Sally (Sarah) Kirkham make on him that he noted in his diary, 'first saw Varanese. May it not be in vain'.

He was always susceptible to good looks, and if a woman combined beauty with intellect and intellect with goodness then he could hold out no more. He met many such in his life and though he did not think of himself, except in rare instances, as a husband, he openly acknowledged his affection for them and treasured their friendship.

In the introduction to the Standard edition of John Wesley's Journal Vol. 1 the editor speaks of Betty Kirkham as Varanese, p. 27 and J.H. Rigg in his 'Living Wesley' p. 48 also makes the same identification. Both are followed by C.E. Vulliamy 'John Wesley' p. 33. But Elsie Harrison gave incontrovertible evidence in 'Son to Susanna' p.66 that Sally was Varanese. Cf. V.H.H. Green 'The Young Wesley' p.207.

But when he met Sally the only other women he knew intimately were his own sisters. He was therefore ripe for love and there seems little doubt that he might easily have proposed to Sally were it not that he was only recently ordained and without financial resources. His own family were impoverished and his father was still struggling with his debts. In any case he was late on the scene. Sally was already affianced to John Chapone, the local schoolmaster whom she married on December 28th, 1725.

It was a happy marriage with five children as the fruit of the union but Sally retained an affection for John Wesley which she said was 'grounded on reason and virtue and entirely agreeable to us both'. This she declared, 'no circumstance of life will ever make me alter'.

It is perhaps a matter for wonder that John took this blow to his hopes with relative calm. The answer must lie in a deepening appreciation of celibacy as proper to the life of a Priest. He had been ordained Deacon in September 1725 and Priest in 1728. This never hardened into conviction but it inhibited him to some degree and certainly saved him from any precipitancy in matters of the heart. He was always inclined to withdraw from the prospect of the consummation of marriage.

Emily, who had waited overlong and suffered overmuch, saw in a match of John and Sally a happiness denied to her. She therefore begged him in a letter not to wait until thirty before coming engaged, but as soon as his affairs allowed, to marry quickly. She spoke from her heart. "If ever you come to suffer the torment of a hopeless love all other afflictions will seem small in comparison of it".

She hoped that so suitable a union would mellow John and free him from the straight jacket of a too rigid discipline of life. All this tumbled out of her letter. "Had you not lost your dear Mrs. C . . . n (Chapon, or ed: Chapone) where had your love been fixed? On heaven I hope principally; but a large share, too, had been hers: you would not have been so spiritualised, but something of this lower world would have had its part in your heart, wise as you are: but being deprived of her there went all hope of worldly happiness, and now the mind which is an active principle, losing its aim here has fixed on its Maker for happiness. This will ever be the end that all rational beings will aim at, and when disappointed of one thing, will soon fix on another".

Wesley never allowed the marriage of Sally to end his friendship. On the contrary it would seem that for Sally John Wesley still had a secure place in her affection whilst on his part, he could be happy in her domestic bliss, and enjoy her company.

In one respect Sally may have exercised a strong influence in shaping his outlook. In the introductory chapter to the first volume of the Journal, the editor takes up a passage from his Journal dated Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday (May 22, 23 and 24) 1738 in which he spoke of the providence of God directing him to à Kempis's 'Christian Pattern' "I had frequently much sensible comfort in reading him, such as I was an utter stranger to before; and meeting likewise with a religious friend which I never had till now, I began to

alter the whole form of my conversation and religious retirement. I communicated every week. I watched against all sin whether in word or deed. I began to aim at, and pray for, inward holiness. So that now, 'doing so much and living so good a life', I doubted not but I was a good Christian."

The operative word is "a religious friend" and the editor seeks ingeniously to establish the identity. An examination of the time in the cipher record of the first diary points to a period between April 10th and May 28th when he was at Stanton. There is a name written in cipher and that name is Varanese.

It was the day after he returned to Oxford that he wrote a letter to his parents (May 28th) saying he was 'lately advised to read Thomas à Kempis over'. The tone of his mother's reply so severely critical of à Kempis, shows that she was certainly not the one who advised him to read "The Christian Pattern".

Later that year (June 18th) John in a letter to his mother speaks of a woman of good judgment who would advise no one very young to read Dr. Taylor's 'Holy Living and Dying' and she was almost certainly Varanese who had directed his attention to à Kempis. The editor concludes that it was Varanese who was his "first religious friend" and who directed him to à Kempis and therefore profoundly shaped his thinking and manner of life.

In his visits to Stanton John Wesley was happy in the company of Sally's unmarried sister, Betty. Evidently she was strongly attracted to him. In a letter to John Wesley, Robert Kirkham, the brother of Sally and Betty wrote a startlingly frank letter to Wesley, ending with a paragraph about his sister.

"2 o'clock. I am come up again with a belly full, sufficit. Your most deserving, queer character — Your worthy personal accomplishments — Your noble endowments of mind — your little and handsome person — and your obliging and desirable conversation have been the pleasing subject of our discourse for some pleasant hours. You have often been in the thoughts of M.B. which I have curiously observed when with her alone, by inward smiles and sighs and abrupt expressions concerning you. Shall this suffice? I caught her this morning in an humble and devout posture on her knees. I am called to read a Spectator to my Sister Capoon (sic). I long for the time when you are to supply my father's absence. Keep your

counsel and burn this when perused. You shall have my reasons in my next. I must conclude. I subscribe myself, your most affectionate friend, and brother I wish I might write.

Robert Kirkham

Poor Betty. She was good certainly but a little difficult. When she died Mrs. Pendarves said Sarah would be reconciled to the loss of a sister who had given her more woe than happiness. She did not make the same appeal to John though there were talks and walks and book readings. The time came when she gave up the unequal struggle and in 1730 married a Mr. Wilson. It was a happy marriage, but short. She died two years later.

Another young woman who took her place in the Cotswold circle of his friends was Nancy Griffiths the daughter of John Griffiths who had been Vicar of Broadway for over twenty years, when Nancy's brother John (known as Robin), was at New College and friendly with John Wesley. It was Robin presumably who first brought John to the Cotswolds. Nancy like the other young women was immediately attracted to John. Indeed there is ground for supposing that the Kirkham sisters (Sarah (Sally), Betty and Damaris the youngest) were aware that Nancy was inclined to resent the attention Wesley paid to them. When Wesley came over for Christmas, 1727, he diplomatically stayed the first night at Broadway before going on to visit his friends at Stanton and Buckland. He talked about his friendship with Nancy when he met Varanese and doubtless assured her there was nothing in it. But the gulf between the Kirkham girls and Nancy remained unbridged.

We know that early in 1731 he went over to see Nancy at Broadway and returned the same evening to Stanton to conclude the day with a game of cards. Again in May 1732 there is reference to the happy round of life at Stanton centering chiefly on walks and talks. During those days he saw Nancy and read parts of Macbeth and Julius Caesar. There was even a "romp" after an evening meal.

But these are tenuous references. Whatever may have been in Nancy's mind John Wesley's major interest was in Stanton, and Nancy insensibly dropped out of the picture.

Perhaps Nancy Griffiths and Damaris, the youngest of the Kirkhams, dreamt of the little scholar from Oxford who was so full of fun and yet with an undercurrent of deep seriousness that made him so fascinating and so elusive. Cryptically Damaris said on one occasion that she wished she had been a



Stanton Rectory.

man for Wesley's sake. His visits both to Stanton and Buckland grew more occasional but Damaris continued on such friendly terms that, assisting in household chores in June 1733, he helped her to shell the peas and with her and others played cards in the evening. Perhaps more than anything else it was the presence of Mary Pendarves which caused Damaris to know that John Wesley would never be for her. On November 15th, 1734 she married Edward Palmer of Berkswell and dropped out of the immediate circle of Wesley's friends.

In any case once Sally had been married it was only Mrs. Mary Pendarves who really mattered. She was a member of the Granville family whom Wesley came to know so well. Her father was a grandson of Sir Bevil Granville and a nephew of the Earl of Bath. Her brother George became Lord Landsdowne and her sister Ann married Sir John Stanley who moved in Court circles. Mary Granville whilst still only seventeen and staying with her uncle married a Cornishman, Mr. Alexander Pendarves. They were an ill assorted pair in age and temperament and interests. After a few years he died leaving her with only a moderate fortune but happy to "be free". She moved principally between Somerset House, Northend where her aunt Lady Stanley lived and her mother and sister at Gloucester. From here she made occasional visits to her friends, the Kirkhams, at Stanton. Here it was that John Wesley came into her life.

In this Cotswold idyll Sally Kirkham was the one who quickened his love but after her marriage he began increasingly to find delight in Mrs. Pendarves' company. She became Aspasia to his Cyrus. She never fell in love but this could possibly have been because she never allowed liking and admiration to deepen into something more, and so she never gave encouragement to one who was in any case diffident and awkward in matters of the heart.

There was a more pertinent reason still. She was religiously inclined and well able in talk and correspondence to discuss serious topics of spiritual life and conduct. At the same time she was a woman of the world without being worldly. She moved in society and enjoyed the fashionable round of balls and operas and the company of cultivated people. She confessed in one of her early letters to John that the life of noise and vanity, could not "afford any entertainment for you".

Even though she enjoyed his company she may have found as time went on that his spiritual intensity was somewhat hard to bear. Certainly when she went to Ireland in 1731

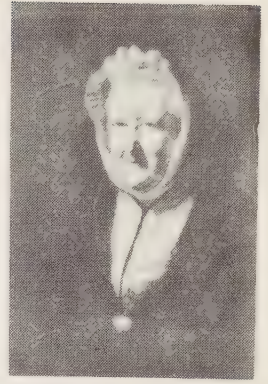
John Wesley waited for letters that never came. Here she knew the exciting friendship of Dean Swift and here also she met the Dr. Delany who later was to become her husband.

John Wesley was not prepared for such a change in their friendship. In his letter written to her on October 3rd 1730 he had spoken of the impossibility of any sort of equality with her. He had declared "I may pursue, but must not overtake!" Nevertheless he said that as long as the breath of life remained in him he would continue to bear the tenderest esteem for her. Following a letter she wrote on October 12th he replied within two weeks and, even so, begged her to pardon the delay in reply.

He may have had a premonition that the friendship meant more to him than to her because in his letter written appropriately on Holy Innocents Day (December 28th 1730) he reflected on his disappointment when Varanese married Jack Chapone and whether he was laying himself open to further sadness in the case of Aspasia. He speaks of the emotion he feels for her but immediately declares "yet is there a sort of soft melancholy mixed with it when I perceive that I am making another avenue for grief, that I am laying open another part of my soul at which the arrows of fortune may enter". He wrote, he confesses, to recommend himself to her esteem because "my heart burns within me when I reflect on the many marks of regard you have already shown".

This avenue of grief was certainly opened when despite his frequent letters to her in Ireland she replied so rarely. In a letter (August 26th 1731) she begged forgiveness for her long silence but went on immediately to ask him not to make use of any epithets before her name and to burn all her letters. From time to time she was conscious of her neglect. In a letter to her sister (March 11th 1732) she wrote "Cyrus by this time has blotted me out of his memory or if he does remember me it can only be to reproach me. What can I say for myself? What can I indeed say to myself that I have neglected so extraordinary a correspondent? I only am the sufferer, but I should be very sorry to have him think my silence proceeded from negligence: I declare 'tis want of time". Of course the excuse was the flimsiest. Had she wanted to write time would have been found, but the earnestness of the little clergyman was vaguely oppressive.

Two years later (July 2nd 1734) she wrote her final letter. Small wonder she began by saying she had never been in such confusion. She did not even attempt self-extenuation. She only asked for his forgiveness and generosity.



Mrs Delany: 'Aspasia' to his 'Cyrus'

But John Wesley was not deceived. There was no case for the renewal of friendship on a former footing. It was a "brush off" and he knew it. Three years had been far too long a silence. He wrote a courteous but final letter in July, 1734.

From that point their paths widely diverged. She married Dr. Patrick Delany who became Dean of Down in 1743. Gracious and beautiful, witty and cultivated she could count the royal family among her friends. Dean Swift spoke, of a "most lovely face of great sweetness" and Edmund Burke declared to Fanny Burney that she was "the model of a perfect fine woman".

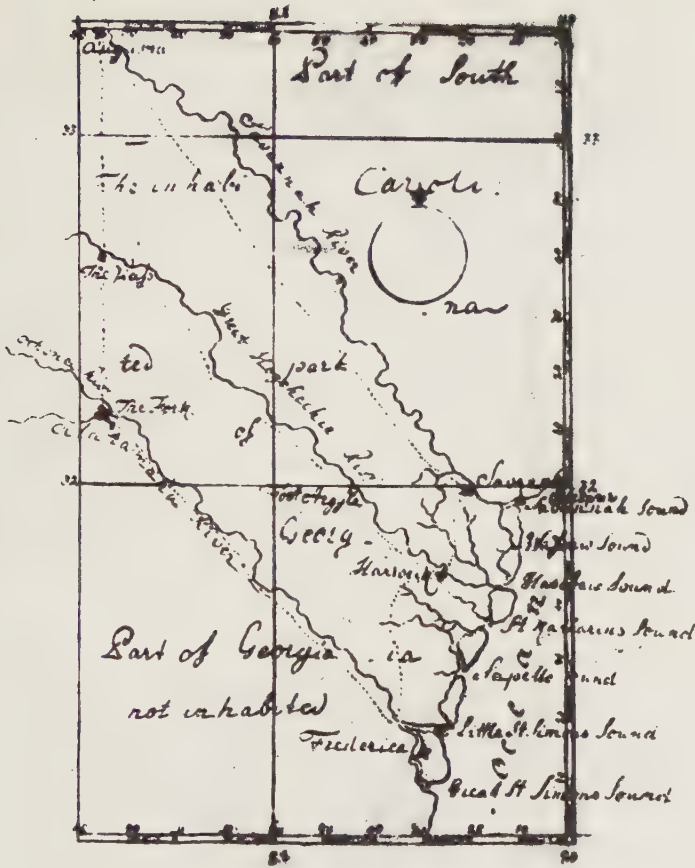
She heard without approval of the spread of the Methodist movement. In her old age she confided to a friend (December 14th, 1783) how disillusioned she had become. "These brothers joined some other young men at Oxford and used to meet of a Sunday evening and read the Scriptures and find out objects of charity to relieve. This was a happy beginning but the vanity of being singular and growing enthusiasts made them endeavour to gain proselytes and adopt that system of religious doctrine which many reasonable people thought pernicious". She put in the third person what she herself believed. But the memory of a once dearly held friendship softened her asperity and she concluded "Well, well, perhaps they did some good to the common people".

Though she pre-deceased John Wesley by three years she was the same age when she died. They spoke with different accents but each had sparkle and distinction. It was good that their paths crossed.

The Cotswold friendships freed Wesley from his early gaucheries of manner. He once spoke to Mrs. Pendarves of "those improprieties of behaviour in which my experience in the world so frequently betrays me".

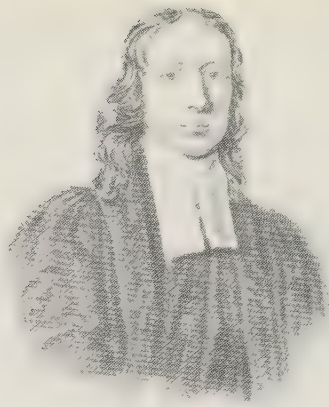
It is possible, however, that his disappointment with Varanese and his failure to sustain the interest of Aspasia predisposed him to accept missionary work in Georgia. Other factors operated, but the closing of doors in the Cotswolds may have assisted mentally in preparing him for new beginnings. That religious fervour and growing intensity of purpose, noted not always approvingly by the Cotswold coterie, could not be satisfied only by reading and spiritual exercises, nor even by the good works of the Holy Club. A greater challenge was needed and when it came, John Wesley was ready.

THE GEORGIA BELLE



Map of the new Colony of Georgia.

When John Wesley accepted General Oglethorpe's invitation to go as Chaplain to the new colonies of Georgia he persuaded his brother, Charles, to go also as Secretary to the General. On October 14th 1735 they set sail on the *Simmonds* with Benjamin Ingham and Charles Delamotte, two friends who had been associated at Oxford with the Holy Club. Once he arrived at Savannah John Wesley found his task far more complex than he had supposed. It was not going to be easy to reach the Indians, nor to make headway with the very mixed colonist community. True they included those differing types of religious refugees of which the Moravians under Spangenburg were the ones who most compelled his admiration and respect; but they also included a motley company of forgers, debtors, unsuccessful speculators, and the inadequate who hoped in a new colony to prove their worth.



John Wesley aged 38.

One compensation, however, was his! Causton, the chief magistrate, who was also the Storekeeper of Savannah, had a niece, Sophia Hopkey, in her late teens, who was pretty, vivacious, seemingly virtuous, and pleasantly startled by his sudden entrance into her somewhat boring and aimless existence. John Wesley on his part was at once alive to her beauty and sensitive to her admiration. He sought every opportunity to be with her.

Throughout his whole life this delight in a woman's company never lessened. At Epworth in 1726 he made visits to Kitty Hargreaves at Gainsborough and to Lincoln where she may well have been an assistant teacher. Kitty remains a shadowy figure but indisputably he was emotionally attracted to her. In that strange mixture of religious exercise and social diversion that John Wesley never found incongruous in his dealings with women, we find in May 1731 at Lincoln, that he had prayers with Kezzy and Miss Kitty, and later he read Law's *Serious Call* to Miss Kitty, and after dining with her he passed the evening in music and cards. Later that summer he was with the two girls again and read with them a play called "The Fall of Mortimer". So it was throughout his itinerant ministry that with total ingenuousness he responded eagerly to the respect and admiration that women of all classes felt for him.

Without doubt, however, in certain instances this response he made to women who liked and admired him was quickened into genuine love. Was this true in the case of Sophy Hopkey? There can be few friendships between a man and a woman where so much data has been provided for speculation and interpretation. It was a case of lively attraction. He was charmed by her natural modesty and her readiness to learn.

The first favourable impression Sophy made was only deepened by their daily meetings, in which, after breakfast, she joined in Devotions. Then between eight and nine Wesley taught her French and at nine they had prayer together. For a further hour she read or wrote in French. At night he read her selections from the writings of Ephraem Syrus, Dean Young and the Sermons of a certain Mr. Reeves.

If ever a girl, therefore, was thrown into a man's company it was Sophy. There were good reasons for this readiness to offer the girl to John as a suitable wife. General Oglethorpe would doubtless then have been ready to see John Wesley settled as Rector of Savannah with increasing ecclesiastical authority, and able, through his administrative gifts, to share in the councils of the young State. Equally, Whilst they were reading or conversing she was so still that 'she seemed to be in all but her attention, dead'. Yet, ruminated Wesley, at other times she was all life, 'active, diligent, indefatigable'. The record of his friendship, set out so fully in the Journal, is remarkable because he hides nothing in his sequence of events and he is ready at all times to analyse his own feelings of warm regard for her.

During the storm on the way to Georgia on board the Simmonds.



Thomas Causton, as Sophy's guardian, was pleased to have a gentleman and scholar in the confidence of the Trustees, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and Oglethorpe himself, to consolidate his own uncertain position in the life of the colony. Mrs. Causton, who was already plagued by the violent overtures of Tom Mellichamp to Sophy's heart, would gladly have accepted John if only to get her niece safely and respectably married. There can be no question that Sophy realised why she was being so gladly entrusted to Wesley each day, and doubtless even though he was so much older, the compound feelings she had of love and respect would have induced her to accept John had he been ready to press his suit.

After the ninth day of meeting, John Wesley realised sufficiently the danger in which he stood, to write to brother Charles a letter in Greek in which he confessed that he stood in jeopardy every hour. When she visited friends in Frederica and John Wesley, who was to go there, went to Causton for directions, he was told "take her into your hands. Do what you will with her. Promise her what you will, I will make it good". He found her in a state of despondency and determined to return to England. The religious arguments he adduced, left her unmoved but when he spoke of their own friendship, she began to soften. When, in his turn, he spoke of the lack of response to his labours, and Oglethorpe's own lack of interest in his pastoral work, and said she was free to return to England since he would no longer devote himself to her needs as formerly, she swiftly replied she would not stir a foot. Then, turning to John in great earnestness, she said "Sir, you encouraged me in my greatest trials. Be not discouraged in your own. Fear nothing. If Mr. Oglethorpe will not, God will help you".

The acid test of the friendship was in the return journey by boat to Savannah. Oglethorpe, still hoping that these two would marry, replied to the question "In what boat should she go?" by the answer "She can go in none but yours and indeed there is none so proper". John Wesley saw immediately what was in the General's mind, but he comforted himself with three somewhat specious reasons for hazarding his emotions. Firstly he argued it was not his choice; secondly he still had the same desire and design to live a single life, and lastly, he was persuaded her own resolution to live single would continue. The whole story of this astonishing voyage is set out so fully and in such polished style in the *Journal* that it may well have been an earlier hurried account written up later for his mother to read.

To March & Miss Sophy engaged
 herself to Mr. W., a person not known
 to the for Handsome craft, neither for
 great wealth, neither for wit, or Grace
 of age or sense, & least of all for Reli-
 gion. And on that 22. they were mar-
 ried at Perry Church (as were the Bower
 & the Duckwade) This being y^e day is
 completed y^e year from my first prea-
 ching to her. What then said, O God,
 I know not now: But I know hereafter.
 O give her rest up, yet, to a strong Delu-
 sion, & the sh. be her end.

Sunday 20. 1737. At the same time told me
 privately, that her husband had forbid
 her, to speak to me any more. Alas poor
 Sophy! y^e 14. is y^e beginning, w^h will
 be her end.

John Wesley's Journal
 reference to Mr. Williamson
 whom Sophy Hopkey
 married.

Accompanied only by the crew of the boat they sailed
 for several days along the coast and at times landed on the
 coast and walked together. Would any other man under
 similar circumstances "pray every hour with Miss Sophy" and
 change that diet occasionally by reading Fleury's "Manners
 of the Ancient Christians" or an exposition of "The Excellent
 Woman"? So, interspersed by landings on islands, did they at
 last reach shore. There had been only one flash-point. Wesley
 had said "Miss Sophy, how far are you engaged to Mr.
 Mellichamp?" and she had said "I have promised either to
 marry him or to marry none at all," whereupon in the relative
 safety provided by that remark John had said "Miss Sophy I
 should think myself happy if I was to spend my life with
 you". But she told him that he didn't know the danger he
 was in and begged him to say no more on the subject. Perhaps
 he breathed an inner sign of relief, and in his Journal he
 laconically adds "we ended our conversation with a psalm".
 Astonishing but true!

Once on shore the daily meetings for reading and prayer
 were resumed and Wesley gave her lessons in French. Time
 and again he was on the point of taking her hand when, as he
 knew, all would be lost. On February, 26th, 1737 he recorded
 in his Journal "Her words, her eyes, and her air, her every
 motion and gesture, were full of such softness and sweetness!



*"I went to America to
convert the Indians . . ."*

I know not what might have been the consequence had I then touched her hand. Any how I avoided it I know not. Surely God is over all". Once he was about "to say too much" when Mr. Causton called them both in, and so, in his words, he was "once more snatched as a brand out of the fire".

At this point, John Wesley's protégé Delamotte, came into the story. He was completely devoted to Wesley and could not bear a woman to come between them. Since he could not share the same house with Wesley if he married, he plainly told him that he ought to cut off his meetings with Sophy because he was daily losing ground. Wesley agreed with him and on March 4th they cast lots, and of the three alternatives: 'Marry', 'Think not of it this year' and 'Think of it no more', it was the third that was chosen. When a final lot was cast to know whether he might even converse with her again, the answer was "only in the presence of Mr. Delamotte". With his astonishing gift of self-analysis, he confessed to his Journal that he knew not how to escape. "If I continued to converse with her, though not alone, I found I should love her more and more". Matters were not made easier by the fact that a Hernhutter Johan Toltschig, whom Wesley trusted, could find no reason to prevent the marriage.

Sophy however had no longer a passive role to play, waiting for the fastidious harassed clergyman to know his own mind. Once he told her that he would not think of marrying until he had accomplished his mission to the Indians, and had made the blow heavier by declaring that he did not feel "strong enough to bear the complicated temptations of a married state". she began to realise that this so-elusive lover was not for her.

Instantly she began to cool and no longer came to his home to receive her French lessons. The end was not long delayed. Although on one day she assured Wesley that she would never take any step without first consulting him, the very next day she became engaged to Mr. Williamson who lived in her Uncle's house. Wesley was taken wholly by surprise, and his diary for March 8th. hid a world of astonishment, bewilderment and grief with the terse entry "Miss Sophy engaged. Alas!" On the next day, however, the diary abounds in short exclamations — "Quite distressed! Confounded! Could not pray!" And then the entry "Tried to pray, lost, sunk". Finally the moving lines : "No such day since I first saw the sun! O deal tenderly with Thy servant! Let me not see such another!"

Wesley's apprehensions about Williamson were fully justified. For him it was an excellent match, and in lively fear that John Wesley might interfere he even refused to allow any conversation between them. Wesley then indulged in one of his pithy reproofs. "Tomorrow Sir, you may be her director, but today she is to direct herself". Four days after the betrothal they were married in a neighbouring Church without any publication of the banns. So careless and informal a wedding would hardly seem legal to Wesley, and his appeal to the Bishop of London's Commissary bore fruit because future marriages without banns were forbidden. Four months passed by, during which time Wesley lamented what he believed to be her insincerity and her absence from religious services. These he plainly stated in a letter to Sophy on July 5th. When no satisfactory answer was forthcoming he took the drastic step, on August 7th., of repelling Mrs. Sophy Williamson from Holy Communion. In no sense could this be really justified although Sophy had every warning and could quite easily have prevented it happening. On that fateful Sunday, Mrs. Burnside, Sophy's friend, said to her that she was much to blame for going to the Table before she cleared herself to him and had concluded "you may easily put an end to this by going to Mr. Wesley and clearing yourself of what you are charged with". Sophy chose rather to allow her



General Oglethorpe.

husband to charge Wesley with defaming his wife and repelling her from Communion.

Once the processes of Law had been set in motion, John Wesley's usefulness to Georgia was at an end. Causton was enraged and the whole colony was forced to take sides. It is not true to say that Wesley fled from Savannah, because he gave the officials full notice that he was leaving. When he left they had ample opportunity for apprehending him since it was twenty days before he reached Charlestown and on December 22nd. 1737 went aboard the "Samuel" and said his long farewell to America.

It was regrettable that he left Georgia under a cloud and that even his German friends were dismayed. Nevertheless, since he meant his stay in the colony only as a preliminary to the mission to the Indians, and since this had become impossible, quite apart from the lawsuit, he felt abundantly justified in returning, and we who have the benefit of hindsight, cannot doubt that he was right. Martin Schmidt, in his definitive book on this Georgia period, (John Wesley: a theological biography 1962) emphasises the fact that the break with Sophy produced a true spiritual crisis which was "an understanding of prevenient grace", and prepared him for the evangelical conversion of May 24th, 1738.

In other respects, however John Wesley must be counted to have had a providential escape. She was undoubtedly a nice attractive girl, scared of the violent Tom Mellichamp, and to some degree of the masterful Williamson, of whom she said "I have no particular inclination. I only promised if no objection appeared". She was drawn irresistibly to John Wesley, and yet finally held back because she knew instinctively that a man who could talk first of Indians and secondly of the drawback to a married state, was no suitable husband for her. Poor girl! Between the inaccessible John and the all too approachable Williamson, a man of no reputation, and her own well-meaning but shallow and suggestible nature, she was doomed to sorrows and frustration.

One trembles to think how much hung on the fact that John seemed always prevented from holding her hand or saying one word too much. Had he married her and settled in Georgia, perhaps in time, as Bishop of the colony, he would have been lost to history for ever. As it was he came back, bruised and shaken but ready for any adventure to which God called him. If one could choose a phrase so often used by him to describe the secret ways of God, this was indeed "a covered Providence".



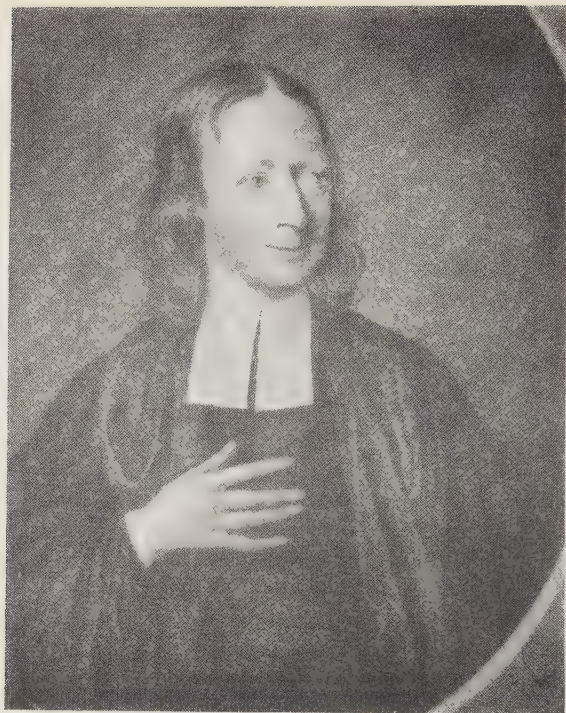
The eighteenth Century ideal of "the noble Savage" and (below) nearer the reality.



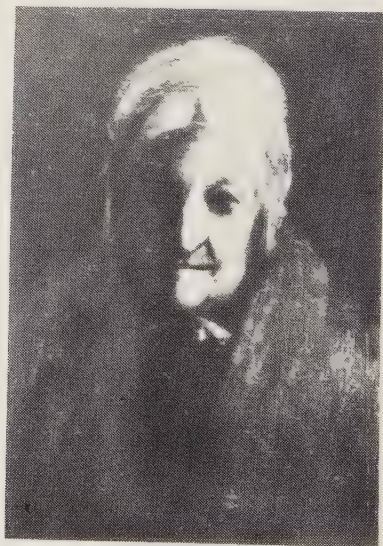
WESLEY'S GREAT LOVE

There is a curious parallel in the story of Sophy Hopkey and Grace Murray. The lively attraction John had for Sophy he most certainly felt for Grace. She also was both lovely and devout. Indeed, she possessed more weapons in her armoury than Sophy could every boast. Married at twenty years of age to Alexander Murray, she was left a widow five years later, but not before she had braved her husband's anger and declared herself a Methodist. When she returned to her mother's home at Newcastle she may well have met John Wesley on his first visit to that city in 1742. By that time she had already been one of the leaders of the Bands at the Foundery in London. Now she was both a speaker and visitor in the women's bands in the North East. Soon she became housekeeper at the Orphan House in Newcastle and found that a major duty was looking after the sick preachers; amongst them was John Bennet who found that it took him half a year (1746) to recover from his fever and who did not try to stop himself from falling in love with her. From this time on they corresponded with each other.

In August 1748 John Wesley himself was indisposed whilst in Newcastle and was nursed by Grace Murray. His encomium sufficiently reveals his growing affection for her. "She has every qualification that I desire. She understands all I want to have done. She is remarkably neat in person, in clothes, in all things. She is nicely frugal yet not sordid. She has much common-sense; contrives everything for the best, makes everything go as far as it will go, foresees what is wanting and provides for it all in time. She is a good work woman, able to do the finest, ready to do the coarsest work. She observes my rules when I am absent as well as when I am present! And takes care that those about her observe them, yet seldom disoblige any of them". True it reads rather like an exceptionally warm testimonial to an employee of high standing, but Wesley intended more than the words conveyed. It is reminiscent of the artless way he spoke admiringly of Sophy on their first meeting. He followed it a little later with much stronger language. He made a proposal of marriage, and



John Wesley in his 50's.



*Grace Murray (Mrs.
Bennet) as an old lady.*

had she only said "yes" without qualification, the whole matter would have been resolved and John would have known a married happiness that later he sought in vain.

As it was, and curiously in similar terms to Sophy Hopkey who also trembled before so great an honour, she could only gasp "This is too great a blessing for me: I can't tell how to believe it. This is all I could have wished for under heaven if I had dared to wish for it." Had Wesley been the ordinary type of lover he would have taken this as complete acceptance and married her without delay. But he had learnt nothing from the temporising of his Georgia days. It was his custom to tell his preachers not to travel one mile the less or nor preach one sermon the less because they were married, and this advice he followed himself both in his courtship of Grace Murray and his marriage to Mrs. Vazeille.

Grace could only claim a temporary success. Though he was setting forth on his way south, she prevailed on him to take her with him. At Chinley they met John Bennet, and here, with astonishing ingenuousness, Wesley left Grace, telling Bennet to take care of her; which very thing he was most inclined to do. Meanwhile the innocent, unsuspecting John recorded "I left her in Cheshire with John Bennet and went on my way rejoicing". Bennet followed up his advantage and when he wooed her and asked if anything existed between John Wesley and herself, she somewhat reprehensibly said "No". She also took care to add, "If Mr. Wesley will give his consent, I will yield". He said, "I will write him this night" and so the fateful letter was despatched. It reached him after he had arrived at the Foundry but he wrote a mild reply to them both.

This might have been final were it not for Grace Murray who, in the next six months, gave some colour to Luke Tyerman's violent assertion that "she was a flirt". Certainly she did not seem to know her own mind. She corresponded with them both in truly affectionate terms. In February 1749 she gladly went with Wesley to Ireland and during the next four months "she examined all the women in the smaller societies and the believers in every place. She settled all the women bands, visited the sick and prayed with the mourners, more and more of whom received remission of sins during her conversation or prayer". Inevitably the old love revived in him with greater ardour than ever. In Dublin they were betrothed by a contract *per verba de praesenti*. This was a bond of marriage honourably binding on the two parties and preparatory to the legal marriage itself.

When they returned to Bristol in July, she heard idle and

untrue rumours of John Wesley's friendship for Molly Francis. In a fit of jealousy she wrote a letter to John Bennet and asked him to meet her on the journey north. They met at Epworth and Bennet told the horrified Wesley that Grace had forwarded all John's letters to her for him to read. In the next few days she seemed distractedly to be torn between the rival lovers. John decided to let John Bennet have her though he had "a piercing conviction of his irreparable loss". Whereupon Grace sent for him in deep distress and cried out "How can you think I love anyone better than I love you. I love you a thousand times better than I ever loved John Bennet in all my life". Then she spoiled it all by adding, "But I'm afraid if I don't marry him he'll run mad". And that very night she promised once more to be Bennet's wife.

No wonder Wesley was perplexed almost beyond bearing. Some days later when they had proceeded to Newcastle, John forced her to make a decision and she replied "I am determined by conscience as well as by inclination to live and die with you". For her part she now wisely wanted Wesley to marry her at once. However, the irresolute lover of Sophy was once again not so easily to be brought to an irrevocable step. He objected on three grounds. First he wished to satisfy John Bennet; secondly to gain his brother's consent, and thirdly to send an account of his reasons for marrying to all preachers and societies. When she, quite properly, said she would not wait longer than a year, John laconically answered "perhaps less time would suffice".

This vacillation, however honourable, would in itself have endangered the marriage, but two further factors made it impossible. First of all John, after a solemn renewal of the contract *per verba de praesenti* made in the presence of witnesses including Christopher Hopper, went off on a northern tour. All might still have been well if Charles Wesley, on receipt of his brother's letter had not impetuously rushed to Newcastle and on to Whitehaven where his unsuspecting brother was staying. Charles poured out all his objections to the marriage but John Wesley temperately gave his reasons for marrying Grace. He said she "was indefatigably patient and inexpressibly tender; quick, clean and skilful, of engaging behaviour and a mild sprightly cheerful and yet serious temper; while her gifts for usefulness were such as he had not seen equalled".



Charles Wesley.

When Charles realised his brother was not to be moved, he galloped back to Grace Murray and persuaded John Bennet to meet them in Newcastle. By sheer determination he overcame Grace's hesitation and less than a week later in the

presence of Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, she was married to John Bennet. Instead of feeling contrite and abashed when he met his brother again, Charles declared impetuously "I renounce all intercourse with you but what I would have with a heathen man or a publican". When Charles finally allowed John to explain the course of events, Charles was amazed and exonerated him from all blame, and placed the onus wholly on Grace. Never was the magnanimity and forbearance of John more strikingly displayed than when, as he wrote in a letter to Thomas Bigg of Newcastle, the desire of his eyes was taken away at a stroke. Wesley kissed Bennet instead of upbraiding him and the next day he resumed his preaching and his travels.

Despite Wesley's readiness to retain John Bennet as a preacher and even to go to Rochdale to preach for him, Bennet was not slow to bite his hand. As Wesley knew, he was increasingly Calvinist in bias, and soon he left the Society (1751) taking with him a hundred members from the Bolton Society, and virtually the entire society at Stockport. Three years later he became pastor of a Calvinist Church at Warburton.

Whoever Wesley married he would not have allowed her to slacken for a moment his zeal for God's work. How much

*Mrs. Bennet's final
comment on Methodism,
from her Journal.*

Last night Mr. M. (Mr. Clap) met him
Mr. M. was absent but the Lord
was with us and blessed us all
praise the Lord my soul for God
is good to reward.
What hath the Lord brought me
through several weeks pasty - Some
cannot express - Surely if God had not
been with me I should have been des-
troyed with the fury of Hell - I was
brought to great exultation - I was
as strong of all sense of God or
Heavenly things all that I had known
or felt of God - was quite taken away I was
quite under a dark vale for weeks

celog - Last night W-B's (Clap) met at
my House - was fuller and the Lord
was amongst us of a truth - Bless
be God that ever I was joined with the
poor despised methodist - I can appeal
unto God - that I despise no sects of
people that profess to know Jesus Christ
but I am bound to confess I prefer
the methodist above all - and for many
Reasons - The Life of God is most amongst
them - and their Discipling is excellent
their Rule and order is my delight -
I would not be thought that I think
all those that are called methodist are

better therefore to have a wife who loved him and could make their home a place of quiet and content? It is true that for a time the Societies would have been divided in their view of the marriage, but as Grace's qualities revealed themselves, criticism would have quickly died and she would have been accepted as his true helpmeet. In this story of blunders, Charles must bear a heavy blame. The responsibility is only slightly lessened by saying that he acted with the best intentions.

John and Grace met only once in later life and that in a brief perfunctory manner, when both were aged. After John Bennet's death Grace conducted weekly meetings for prayer and fellowship and gave herself to the upbringing of her five boys. Later she moved to Derbyshire and was known for her saintliness and good works. She died in 1803 in her eighty-fifth year. In a lonely Churchyard near Chapel-en-le-Frith, there is a tombstone on which her name and dates of birth and death are inscribed, and underneath the memorable words: "His faithfulness not mine".

Wesley's version of the Grace Murray episode is contained in a MS in the British Museum and published in a book 'Wesley's Last Love' (London 1910) by Augustia Legev, and in the first edition of 'The Lord's Horseman' (New York & London 1928) by Umphrey Lee. See also an article entitled "John Wesley's First Marriage" by Frank Baker in the London Quarterly and Holborn Review for October 1967 and another entitled "John Wesley's Only Marriage.

But Dr, Frederick E. Maser in an article entitled "Wesley's Only Marriage" in Methodist History October 1977 argues that the *de praesenti* contract between Wesley and Grace Murray contained three conditions which required to be fulfilled before it became legally binding. These conditions were "he must get the matter straight with her other suitor, John Bennet; in accordance with a long standing agreement, he must secure the consent of his brother Charles; and he must seek the understanding prayers of the Methodist preachers and people". Maser argues that as none of these conditions were ever fulfilled the contract was destroyed, "leaving either party to marry whomsoever they wished". Ed.

THE UNHAPPY MARRIAGE



Ride ride

The first question is not to ask why John Wesley's marriage was unhappy. In the very nature of the case nothing else could be expected. When John Wesley married Mrs. Vazeille, the two magazines which recorded the event, spoke of her fortune. The Gentleman's Magazine which gave the date as February 18th 1751, spoke of her as a merchant's widow with an income of £300 per annum; the London Magazine which gave the date as February 19th referred to her as "a widow lady of large fortune". It had been estimated that the fortune was £10,000 invested in three per cent consols. What we do know is that with John Wesley's consent the fortune was wholly secured for her and her four children. By his own express desire he never touched a penny of it.



*Reputed portrait of
Mrs. John Wesley
(Mrs. Vazeille)*

The undeniable fact, however, is that she was a middle-aged widow with a grown-up family who lived in great comfort, and now was asked to companion a man who was incessantly on the move and whose constant preoccupation was the welfare of the Methodist Societies. To her credit it must be said that she made the attempt. A few weeks after their marriage she made a journey North with him and later in the summer, she accompanied him to Cornwall. In the following March she and one of her daughters endured the rigours and hardships of a further three months journey to the north of England. It is scarcely possible, however, that at her age, and with her background of easy affluence, she could long have sustained the privations of an itinerant life.

Why did he do it? Despite his own reserve and the all too scanty references in his Journal, the intervention of Charles Wesley in his courtship of Grace Murray was the heaviest blow he could suffer. The contract *per verba de praesenti*, solemnly re-affirmed, was in his eyes entirely binding as a marriage contract. As Dr. Frank Baker has shown, it had the force of law. He was, therefore, doubly shaken because in addition to his brother's impetuosity he had the disillusionment of a woman he loved retracting an oath and therefore breaking a sacred bond. Although he forgave both Charles and Grace, and for that matter John Bennet, who cuts a somewhat sorry figure, he was inwardly resolved not to allow such a mischance to recur.

This was further driven home by his brother's own happy marriage to Sarah Gwynne, daughter of a Welsh squire, on April 8th 1749. This was a happiness he anticipated for himself, and when a week after Charles' marriage John took Grace Murray to Ireland to share in the work he must have thought that she would be to him as Sarah was to Charles. In a poem written at this time he dwells on her graces:

"In early dawn of life, serene,
Mild, sweet, and tender was her mood;
Her pleasing form spoke all within
Soft and compassionately good;
Listening to every wretch's care,
Mingling with each her friendly tear.

I saw her run, with winged speed,
In works of faith and labouring love;
I saw her glorious toil succeed,
And showers of blessing from above

Crowning her warm effectual prayer,
And glorified my God in her”.

When, therefore, his own plans were disrupted he was resolved that Charles should never again be free to interfere. It was at this fatal juncture that he had an accident on London Bridge as he was rushing from the Foundry to Snowfields to meet his congregation before the start of a northern tour. He slipped on the ice and badly sprained his ankle. The journey north had to be delayed. He took up his quarters in the house of Mrs. Vazeille in Threadneedle Street where he engaged for some days in “prayer, reading and conversation, partly in writing a Hebrew Grammar, and in Lessons for Children”.

He was always susceptible to the kindness and attention of women and doubtless Mrs. Vazeille proved a most capable nurse. He was forty eight years old and time would not wait indefinitely for him to make up his mind. As previously he had been too slow, so now he was too fast. Within the week he had not only proposed but had married. At that time he could not easily set his foot to the ground and when he preached the following Sunday he did so in a kneeling position. The adage that those who marry in haste repent at leisure precisely applied to Wesley’s action.

It must be said that by his time in life he was not only completely settled in his habits and style of life, but that he was prepared to make no concessions because of his married state. He averred to Henry Moore that he would not preach one sermon or travel one mile less. Indeed he said to his wife “If I thought my dear I should have to travel or preach less; as well as I love you I would never see your face more”. This was an intolerable obligation to lay on his wife. It showed that John Wesley must bear a great share of the blame for marrying when he had no taste or inclination for family life. Possibly Grace Murray for a time could have substained the pace but certainly not the middle-aged Mrs. Vazeille. She did attempt it on and off for the first four years. She went to the north of England, to Cornwall and to Scotland, and she experienced both the rude discomforts of travel and at times the unkindly behaviour of mobs. Nor was she accepted by Wesley’s people who know him as their leader, but looked with frosty eye on one from a different social and ecclesiastical background, who so suddenly was thrust upon them. She was doubly handicapped in any case because by temperament she craved total attention to her own demands, and linked to an almost ungovernable temper, she had a lively jealousy of



Mrs. John Wesley.

Wesley's friendship with other women. Within a year of the marriage, Vincent Perronet was expressing to Charles Wesley his sadness at her "angry, bitter spirit". Charles Wesley needed no convincing. He and his wife Sally were guests of Mrs. Vazeille for some days in 1750 and he found her to be "a woman of mournful spirit". When on February 2nd 1751, he was told, without being previously consulted about his brother's marriage, he "retired to mourn" with his wife. His groaning continued for several days and he said he could "eat no pleasant food, nor preach, nor rest, either by night or day".

In his Journal, Charles told his wife, "I called two minutes before preaching, on Mrs. Wesley at the Foundry and in all that time had not one quarrel". On September 21st 1755 he wrote to Sally "I hope Mrs. W. keeps her distance. If malice is stronger in her than pride she will pay you a mischievous visit. Poor Mr. Lefevre breakfasted with me this morning and lamented that he cannot love her" In one letter to his wife on July 19th 1766, Charles says grimly about his sister-in-law living in London — "I do not wonder that my poor brother trembles and quakes at the thought of coming to London".

Despite the unhappiness which showed itself almost from the start, Mrs. John Wesley continued till 1755 the unequal struggle of trying to keep up with John in his journeyings. Then her travellings virtually ceased and she gave herself at home to the self-tormenting task of wondering what her husband was doing. Fuel was added to the flame of her jealousy by intercepting letters to Wesley from his women correspondents. At first she did it legitimately since inadvisedly he told her to open all letters addressed to himself. As her jealousy mounted, however, she did not hesitate to search his pockets and rifle his drawers.

One main cause of the unbridgeable rift which arose between them was Wesley's friendship with Sarah Ryan whose past had been disreputable, but who, after her conversion, became housekeeper at the New Room. Wesley wrote to Sarah that he had "a thousand little tart unkind reflections in return for the kindest words I could devise.

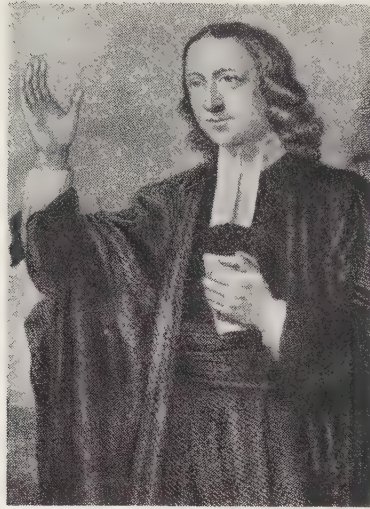
Like drops of eating water on the marble,
At length have worn my sinking spirits down."

In another letter he complained that his wife had found a letter in his pockets and opened it — "When she read it God broke her heart and I afterwards found her in such a temper as I have not seen in her for several years. She has continued in the same ever since"

It was on the 27th January 1758 that Wesley wrote to Sarah that his wife, after many severe words, had left him, vowing to see him no more. His troubles, however, were not to be lightly ended. She continued to dog his footsteps, sometimes, according to John Hampson, ordering a chaise and driving a hundred miles to see who was with her husband in his carriage when he entered a town. On October 23rd 1759 in a letter to his wife, he set down ten excellent reasons for disliking her behaviour and equally ten ways by which she could amend her ways. The logic was unanswerable but the psychology was deplorable. It only served to inflame her temper and the very next month (November 24th 1759) he wrote again to say "You gain occasion to make people think ill of me and to make them think well of you. You totally lose my esteem; you violently shock my love; you quite destroy my confidence. You oblige me to lock up everything as from a thief; to stand continually upon my guard . . ."

Insensibly she drifted out of his life. Often she went off only to return again. At last on January 23rd 1771, he wrote the famous words "For what purpose I know not, my wife set out for Newcastle, purposing never to return. Non eam reliqui; non dimisi; non revocabo". (I have not left her; I have not sent her away; I will not recall her".) She did return temporarily but on October 2nd 1778 he addressed perhaps the most trenchant letter of rebuke ever written by a famous man to his wife. "You have laid innumerable stumbling blocks in the way both of the wise and unwise. You have served the cause and increased the number of rebels, deists, and atheists; and weakened the hands of those that love and fear God. If you were to live a thousand years twice told, you could not undo the mischief which you have done. And till you have done all you can towards it, I bid you Farewell". When she died in 1781 he was in the West of England and was not even informed. On October 12th 1781 he records in the Journal, "I came to London and was informed that my wife died on Monday". So the long martyrdom of thirty years was over. (It ought to be said however, that he was fond of his two step daughters and Jennie who married Mr. Smith of the Orphan House, Newcastle was very good to John Wesley). Her money went to a son and one ring went to her husband. She had the last word after all!

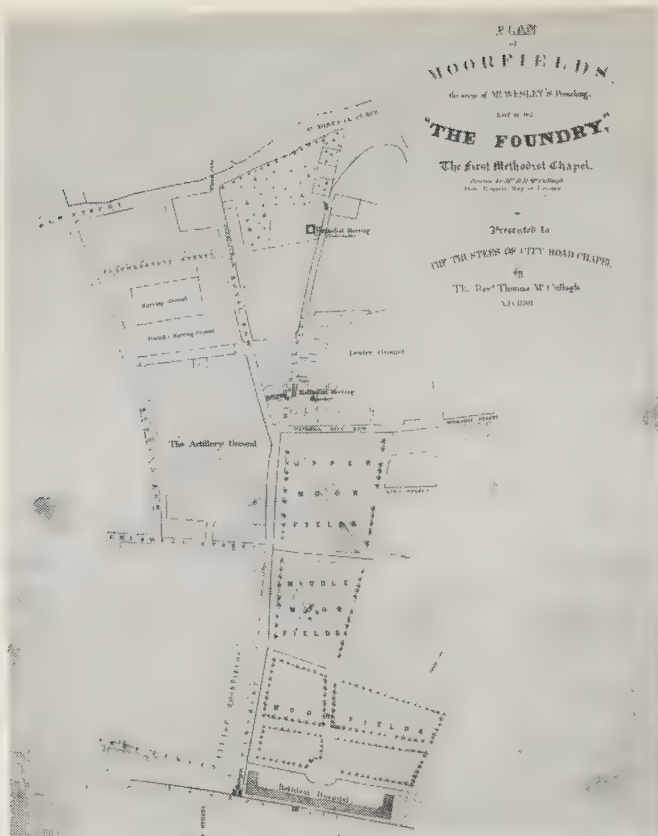
THE MIRROR OF COURTESY



John Wesley

In the summer of 1750 a small group of people waited outside the "Old Dog Inn" Preston for the carrier's cart to take them to Bolton and Manchester. Amongst them was Martha Thompson, tall, fair, good looking, and nineteen years of age. Her mother had died and her father had married again. She did not like her step-mother, and rather than stay at home she had written to a wealthy Preston lady now living in London, and had obtained a domestic situation in the household. The journey took many days. After the rough jolting of the cart to Manchester, there was a coach to take her through the country lanes of Cheshire to the Potteries; after two days wait, a further wearisome journey to Birmingham; and lastly, by slow stages, the ride through Oxford to London. The whole journey took more days than the present rail journey would take hours.

When at last the intrepid girl reached London, sore, shaken and weary, she quickly settled down in her new home and for many months had no backward glances. A letter to Preston cost eighteen pence and might take three weeks to arrive. It seemed that Martha would spend her life in London, with Preston but a memory of her youth. Then came the memorable day when she passed through Moorfields on her way to the city. On an open space she saw a great crowd gathered around a small man, sparse in build, with fine



Moorfields, showing the location of the Foundry.

sensitive, sharply-cut features. From his gown and bands he was obviously a clergyman, and from his voice and appearance a scholar; yet with easy authority he held the close attention of a variously assorted audience. A strange sight indeed; Martha pressed closer and heard him preach on the necessity and nature of the new birth and how it could be received. Then the multitude broke into such singing as she thought belonged only to the choir of heaven.

She hurried home and poured out her story to a plainly scandalized mistress. She was told that it was none other than John Wesley to whom she had been listening, and that she must take care never to go again because these Methodists would drive her mad with their unrestrained fanaticism. Martha heard but she could not obey. Greater than the call to prudence was an incessant prompting of spirit not to be denied. On her next half day she hurried off to Moorfields, and to her great joy John Wesley was there, and a vast crowd was listening intently to his message of God's love for the lost and His call to repentance. Martha could hold out no longer.

She accepted the open invitation and knew that her sins had been forgiven and that she was a new creation in Christ Jesus. The last hymn perfectly matched her new mood of joy and peace. It was Isaacs Watts' "The Lord Jehovah reigns". and it was sung to the tune 'Darwell'. One verse she remembered all her life.

“And will this Sovereign King
of Glory condescend?
And will He write His name
My Father and my Friend?
I love His name, I love His word
Join all my powers to praise the Lord!”

She came back home, whether in the body or out of the body she knew not. Quickly she told her mistress and then her fellow servants the wonderful news, but they received it with alarm and dismay. Nothing perturbed, Martha went about her household duties with a light heart singing snatches of Watts' hymn. After a few days the servants of the house demanded to see the mistress. "Martha Thompson is not right in the head", they said, "she keeps singing about the Sovereign King of Glory". When the story was told to the master of the house he sent for two doctors to investigate her condition. They were firmly of the opinion that Martha had religious mania and that she must be confined in a madhouse where



Bedlam.

she would do no harm to herself or to others.

Next day Martha was told she must prepare for a drive, and all unsuspectingly she got into a coach and then was driven to Bedlam. The very word is now part of our language as synonymous with violence and noise. Gradually Martha realised the terror of the situation. She was in a lunatic asylum without money or friends, and her family two hundred miles away and totally ignorant of her plight! What chafed her spirit was not only the incarceration but the deadening inactivity of the long days. She was so noticeably different from the other poor creatures that the matron gave her increasing opportunities to help with domestic work. One day as she was sweeping in a waiting room, a man called to see his wife, and whilst he waited, Martha told him her story and begged him to deliver a letter to Mr. Wesley. To her joy and astonishment he said he was a Methodist and promised to deliver it personally.

Within a day Martha was summoned before two doctors who had been sent by Mr. Wesley to investigate her case. After a lengthy examination they reported that she was perfectly sane and ought immediately to be discharged. Then came a message from John Wesley himself asking her to meet him at the Foundery.

Joyfully, after two years and more of nightmarish existence in Bedlam, she sped to meet the great man and tell her story. He listened sympathetically throughout and then asked her about her future plans. At once she said that she longed to get back to Preston and home. For ten days she was cared for at the Foundery, and good Methodists supplied her with money and clothing for the journey. They told her that soon Mr. Wesley was starting on an itinerary that would take him through the Potteries and the Black Country and she must be ready to start with him. Then came the glad moment when she was lifted on to the horse behind John Wesley and the long journey began.



The Foundery.

He showed her exquisite courtesy and kindness until at Stafford they parted company. Wesley booked her a seat on the coach for Manchester and set his horse's head to Wolverhampton. At Manchester she caught the carrier's cart, and after five long fantastic years was back one night in Preston. She came straight to her father's house, and it seemed to him, who had supposed her dead, that 'the lost was found, and the dead was alive again'.

Martha took up the trade to which as a girl she had become apprenticed, and soon her reputation as dressmaker

was known over the town. She took a shop, employed assistants, engaged apprentices and prospered in business. Her single cause of misery lay in the fact that no Methodist Society existed in Preston. Judge of her happiness, therefore, when she heard that a certain William Livesey was conducting a little Methodist Society in his house at Brimicroft six miles from Preston. Every Sunday Martha walked there and back in order to join fifteen like minded worshippers. Then she persuaded a neighbour, Mrs. Walmsley the landlady at the Dog Inn, to come, and soon the son, William Walmsley, joined them. Mother and son were soundly converted, and inevitably the three asked each other why they should walk twelve miles each Sunday, when God was calling them to start a society in Preston. The class meeting was started at the Dog Inn with William Walmsley as leader and four other members, for Martha had brought two more women to join them. Travelling preachers on the Haworth Round came every six weeks, and then, as the society grew, every fortnight.

One day Martha heard from John Wesley that he was soon to preach at Chorley. She took the little Society at Preston to hear him and paid all their expenses. The only non-Christian was the driver, and at the meeting he too was converted and became a diligent member of the society.

After a few years Martha Thompson married Mr. J. B. Whitehead a brassfounder and button manufacturer from Birmingham. They had many children and one of their grandsons became Mayor of Preston. Martha used her wealth and position to further the cause of Methodism. She entertained the preachers, was widely known for her works of charity, and four times welcomed John Wesley himself to Preston. On his visit in 1790 it seemed as though all the town had thronged the Fishergate to see him pass, leaning on the arms of Roger Crane and one of his preachers.

John Wesley died the next year but Martha lived until 1820 and by that time Methodism was securely established in the town she had served so well.

When she knew her end was approaching she gathered her children and grandchildren around her bed and asked them to sing her favourite hymn to the tune "Darwell". And so for the last time she united her thin quavering voice to their lusty young voices, and she sang the words that had supported her through the testings of a lifetime.

"And will this Sovereign King
Of Glory condescend?
And will He write His name

My Father and my Friend?
I love His name, I love His word,
Join all my powers to praise the Lord."

The story of Martha Thompson lights up John Wesley's natural sympathy with the ill-treated and victimised. His dealings with Sarah Ryan illustrate his readiness to champion one who reformed her ways but was still liable to be victimised by the suspicion of others and more especially by the slanderous tongue of his wife.

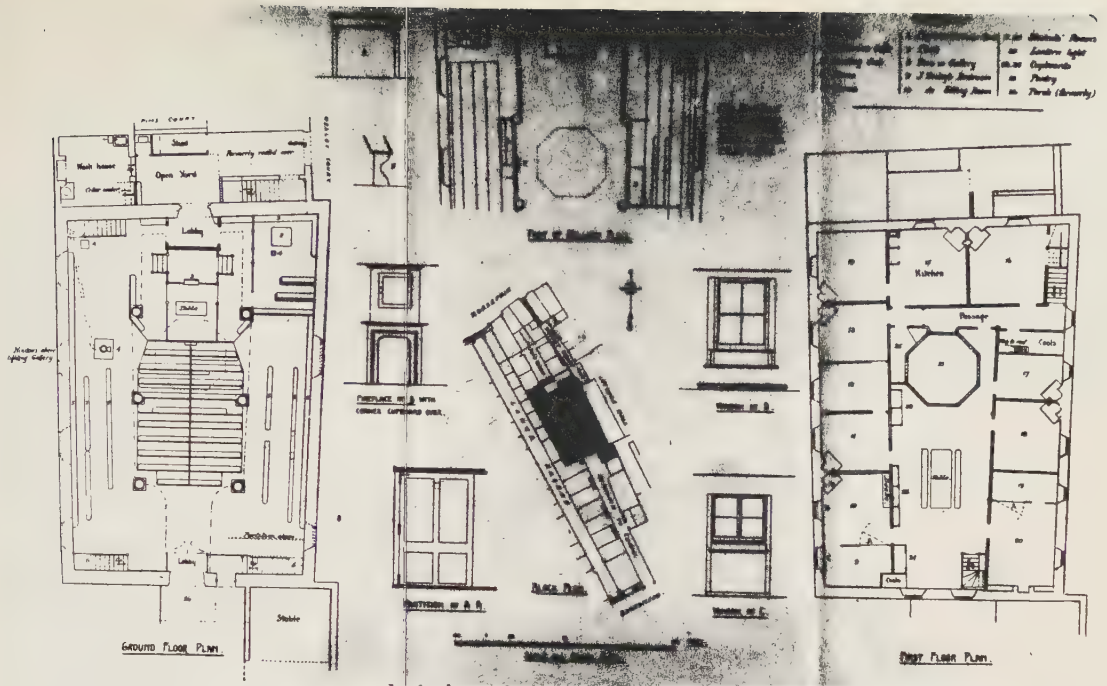
Sarah Ryan had been a domestic servant and at nineteen had married a man who, unknown to her, was already married. In the tangled skein of her life she became engaged to an Italian, but yielded to the hot ardour of an Irish seafaring man called Ryan and married him. Then when it appeared that he was lost at sea she returned to her Italian fiance only to be reclaimed by Ryan. The marriage was desperately unhappy and finally he abandoned her. Then she was converted and became a Methodist. After a period she applied for the post of housekeeper at the New Room Bristol and astonishingly John Wesley was ready to appoint her.

It has been assumed that she was housekeeper at Kingswood School but Ralph Bates (W.H.S. Proc. May 1972) has given strong reasons for supposing the post was actually at the New Room. Certainly she had some connection with Kingswood and perhaps some oversight.

Indeed in the following two years he wrote more perhaps to her than anyone else. The fact that he knew her humble beginnings is shown in a letter written from Newbury November 8th 1757. As though realising the appointment was regarded as unwise by many he said, "On what a pinnacle do you stand. You are placed in the eye of all the world, friends and enemies. You have no experience of these things, no knowledge of the people, no advantages of education not large natural abilities, and are but a novice, as it were, in the ways of God! It requires all the omnipotent love of God to preserve you in your present station. Stand fast in the Lord and in the power of His might! If you continue teachable and advisable I know nothing that shall be able to hurt you".

Evidently in the two weeks that elapsed before writing his next letter Wesley had heard from her and been 'refreshed'. He loved her simplicity, and said, 'Whatever freedom you use, it will be welcome'. Even so the letter betrays a little anxiety. He said he had been censured for his confidence in her by some of her nearest friends, but he refused to repent of it. However he gave her four ways by which she could best perform her duties.

Less than a month later his hidden fears colour the words he uses. "Perhaps few people in England have been in so dangerous a situation as you are now. I know not whether any other was ever so regarded both by my brother and me



at the same time. What can I do to help you?"

He had cause to be uneasy. Chief of those ready to condemn his choice of her as housekeeper was his own wife. On a visit to the New Room and seeing Mrs. Ryan at table with preachers by her, she exclaimed "The whore now serving you has three husbands living!" And this was her version of Sarah Ryan's marital adventures. John Wesley following this outburst asked Sarah Ryan in a letter how she felt during her "late trial". He asked whether the incident had caused any resentment or any wish that things should be otherwise. This was surely asking the impossible but with astonishing naivete he observed he had never seen her so moved and wanted to know if her soul all the time was "calmly stayed on God".

Mrs. John Wesley rifled his pockets and discovered this letter (He was preaching at the chapel and so the coast was clear. Unhappily he had left the letter finished but not sealed). It was the last paragraph which particularly concerned her. John Wesley observed that it was expedient for Sarah to go through evil and good report, and that as far as he was concerned, conversing with her either by speaking or writing was an unspeakable blessing. He even penned the words, "I cannot think of you without thinking of God". The cup of her wrath must have overflowed when she read that "others

Plans of the New Room, Bristol, showing the preacher's accommodation.



*The New Room, Bristol,
the exterior.*

often lead me to Him; but it is as it were, going round about: you bring me straight into His presence". But the truly wounding line for Mrs. Wesley lay in the last sentence, - "Therefore whoever warns me against trusting you, I cannot refrain, as I am clearly convinced He calls me to it".

No wonder that given Mrs. Wesley's explosive temper, John Wesley had to confess in a further letter to Sarah that his wife had spoken many severe words and had gone, vowing to see him no more. He had been married only seven years but his disclosure of her being in so violent a temper as he had not seen for years suggests there had been many such outbursts.

It would be interesting to know Sarah's reaction on reading this letter and being asked whether the vigour of her spirit had been damped; whether in ease or pain she was always attentive to the voice of God and what kind of humility did she feel? Surely it was only John Wesley who could ask her "to live like an angel here below, or rather like the Son of God". In his closing apostrophe he said, 'Woman, walk thou as Christ walked; then you cannot but love and pray for,

Your affectionate brother,
John Wesley.

As with all his friends he was not only interested in the state of Sarah Ryan's soul but her health of body. He had evidently prescribed some medicine which Sarah was unwilling to take. She had instead been drinking tar water and John Wesley writing to Dorothy Furly (Colchester December 28th 1758) described it as 'extremely nauseous'. He thought it would produce costiveness unless stewed prunes were taken with it every second or third night. It all made him wish that she would return to his own prescription.

Meanwhile Mrs. John Wesley was never the woman to drop a vendetta and the following Spring in a letter to Ebenezer Blackwell John Wesley asked his close friend whether he ever imagined he could be a match for Wesley's wife. It was impossible. "By her exquisite art she had already made you think ill of two very deserving women". Wesley hazards the guess that he had probably been puzzled to know what to think of him or may have thought him a little in the wrong. He is afraid that his friend has been regaled with the faults of many in the Society and he begs him to look inward and to "live at home". There follows one of Wesley's prescient and memorable observations. "The more we know of our own faults and the less of other people's, the more will the work of God prosper in our hearts".

The reply of Ebenezer Blackwell, who deservedly was to be a friend of Wesley for forty years, was a model of candour and circumspection. He recognises that he is no match for Mrs. Wesley, but denies she has made him think ill of Mrs. Ryan and Mrs. Crosby. He declares he hardly ever sees Mrs. Wesley from the time Wesley leaves London until the day he returns and protests that he would be glad to be excused that honour were it not out of civility to Wesley himself.

The triangular situation did not get any easier. Writing to his wife a month later he accused her of opening his bureau and taking out many letters and papers on the pretence that he was conversing with Sisters Ryan and Crosby. He confessed that humouring her had only left matters as they were. "I knew giving a person a drink would not cure a dropsy". However, he wrote that to humour her friends he did for a time drop all correspondence with Sarah Ryan and Sarah Crosby only to find that she still "robbed" him again. He reproached her also for "throwing squibs at me in company" and speaking with such keenness in private as no wife ought to use to a husband. His parthian shaft was to wish her the blessing she needed above all others, namely "unfeigned and deep repentance".

Actually the correspondence with Sarah Ryan diminished after the first two years. After four years she left her post of matron. Before going to Bristol Sarah Ryan had lodged with Mrs. Sarah Crosby at Christopher Alley in Moorfields, and now these two joined Mary Bosanquet in the running of an orphanage at Leytonstone. From thence forward she devoted her short life to the service of Mary Bosanquet. The work at Bristol had been too heavy for her frail constitution and so she returned to London to live with her sister. But she became very ill and was nursed and cared for by Mary Bosanquet who, in return, was greatly helped by Sarah Ryan's spiritual experience. Upon Sarah's recovery, therefore, she decided that they 'having one heart, one mind and one purse' ought to have "one habitation".

As soon as they were settled, Mary Bosanquet and Sarah decided to spend an hour each night in devotional reading and prayer. Soon they were joined by others until twenty five attended. Out of this a smaller group was formed to meet on another evening. Wesley was aware of all these developments and when the work grew he sent a preacher to visit the society. He also knew of Sarah's theological reading and in one letter to Dorothy Furly he said, "Salvation from sin is a deeper and higher work than either you or Sarah Ryan can conceive. You are continually apt to throw away what you

have for what you want”.

From her new home at ‘The Cedars Leytonstone’ Sarah wrote a frank letter to Wesley (March 6th 1764) in which she said, “Honoured and dear Sir, I have often heard you do not take those persons to be real friends who reprove you or tell you what they think wrong; but cleave to those who give praise and respect, though sometimes only from the teeth outward”. This was honest comment from one who went on to say “I am nearly concerned for your prosperity because I have received more good through you than any other person in the world and likewise on account of our Lord’s glory in the workland among His people whom my soul loveth”.

Wesley replied promptly, and without the slightest pique, praised her for writing so freely. But he asked who were they who praised him to his face because he knew of none such, and in any case would not cleave to any on this account. Then he turned to the other charge that he does not take to be real friends those who speak critically. He pointed out gently that none had spoken more frankly than Mary Bosanquet and Sarah herself and most certainly he counted them to be real friends. He concluded with a series of questions concerned with her spiritual state and in particular her growth in grace.

She replied to these questions on April 5th and in his letter of April 23rd John Wesley returned to his catechising, asking her in particular about a direct witness that she had been saved from sin and whether she experienced lowness of spirits and wandering thoughts. She answered wisely but testified to a direct witness though not always unclouded. Then in her turn she spoke straightly to him, ‘You are apt to worship God in His children. I mean you cleave too much to those whom you believe to be dear to God. You do not let the help you receive from them raise your heart to God himself, that while you love for His sake, you may be free from them, finding Jesus nearest to your heart”. (May 4th 1764).



*John Wesley's room, the
New Room, Bristol.*

As always John Wesley received this without the slightest resentment but went on again to question Sarah about her degree of spiritual enlightenment. She replied on October 31st of that year that “the depth of your questions surpasses my understanding”. How wise a comment from one who still knew Wesley to be “as a natural parent”, and who declared she had never lost the childlike holy affection she felt for him.

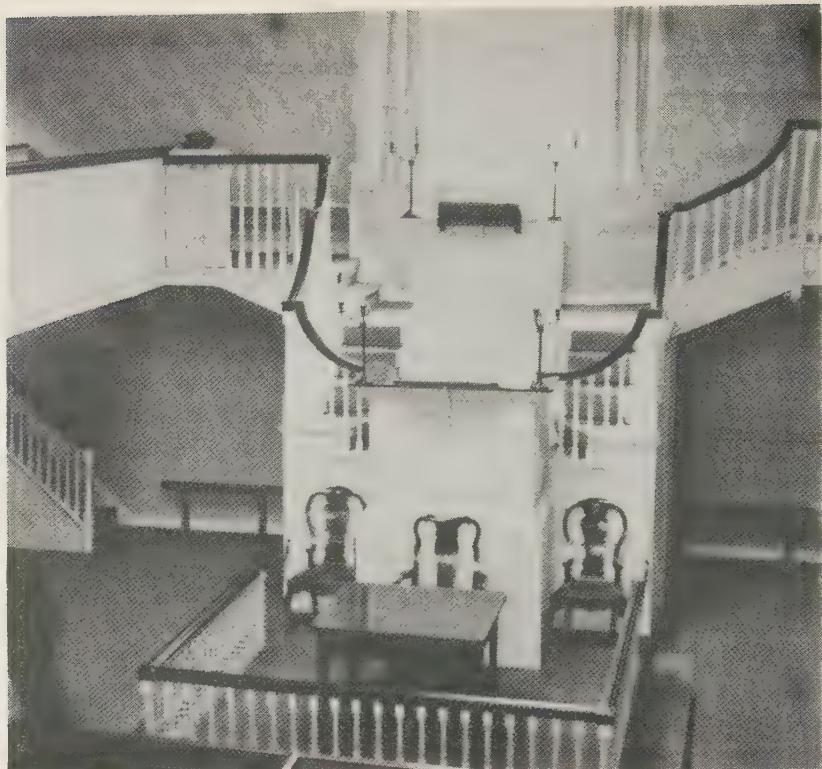
There can be no doubting the mutual trust which enabled them to speak so frankly to each other. Thus John Wesley

seriously questioned Sarah Ryan's belief that being rooted and grounded in God's love she could not now fall from it. In a letter written to Miss March he returned to this same theme and quoted Sarah Ryan as supposing that "Pain, yea much pain must go before an entire cure". But Wesley wisely commented that though this was the case with Sarah herself, it need not. "Pain is no more salutary than pleasure. Saving grace is essentially such, saving pain but accidentally. . . . To use the grace we have, and now to expect all we want, is the grand secret".

It was this one aspect of Sarah's experience which troubled Wesley most. He thought it did not sufficiently take account of human nature. Indeed, writing once to Peggy Dale, he said, she only had to go to Leytonstone and talk to Sarah and she would give up the quest for Perfection because "all that, happens to all who converse with Sarah Ryan, who places it too high". This misgiving about Sarah's belief in Final Perseverance was manifest in his letter written under a clear sense of restraint. He began ominously by saying it was his plain duty to tell her what was on his mind. He would not detail the many things in her which gave him pleasure but those that gave him concern. These amounted to the danger of spiritual pride in appearing to be above instruction in the matter of Sanctification. This in Wesley's view had led her to undervalue the experience of every one else. He warned her also against enthusiasm because when something is from God we may mix it with something from nature especially if we have a lively imagination. His frankest criticism was reserved for the last paragraph. He said he had frequently heard with some appearance of truth that Sarah endeavoured to monopolise the affections of all that fell into her hands. "You destroy the nearest and dearest connexion they had before, and make them quite cool and indifferent to their most intimate friends".

It must be supposed that the use of such plain blunt language on both sides would impair their trust and regard. But that is because, unlike Sarah and John Wesley, many do not like hurting their friends or risking, by candid speaking, the friendship itself. They had no such fears or inhibitions. They both believed that the wounds of a friend are faithful.

When he wrote to Sarah Crosby he showed himself fully aware that the ladies of Leytonstone (Mary Bosanquet, Sarah Crosby and Sarah Ryan) were ready to criticise his spiritual experience but he showed no rancour. Indeed he only asked to be shown one text in the Bible which speaks of a state from which it is not possible to fall. She had evidently



*The New Room, Bristol,
the interior*

told him that he was losing his authority by not living closer to God. But in the mildest and most patient manner he asked how any could know whether he was living more or less closely to God? He said to Sarah Crosby in conclusion what repeatedly he had said to her friend Sarah Ryan. "I take well all that you say, and I love you the more, the more free you are. That is another total mistake, that I dislike anyone for plain dealing".

But the end for Sarah Ryan was drawing near. In a letter to Miss March just a month before she died, John Wesley wrote "Sally continues with you a little longer to quicken you in the way. Why should not a living Christian be exactly of the same spirit with a dying Christian seeing the difference between her life and ours is nothing when compared to eternity? The last scene of life in dying believers is of great use to those who are about them".

Sarah died on August 17th 1768 and it was a severe blow to Mary Bosanquet who said, "The Lord gave her to me as a mother". Henry Moore who wrote lives of both John Wesley and Mrs. Fletcher (nee Mary Bosanquet) declared Sarah Ryan

to be Mary Bosanquet's "twin soul" and affirmed that "she proved the whole of the eight beautitudes". When she died Mary Bosanquet spoke of her as "my invaluable friend".

It is a signal instance of Wesley's judgment and tolerance that he appointed her to be matron of the New Room in Bristol in those early days when a wrong appointment could have had disastrous results. It is a mark of his innate courtesy that he refused to let her somewhat dubious past prejudice him. Despite the fears of some of his friends and the bitter jibes of his wife he showed no doubt concerning her ability to perform her duties.

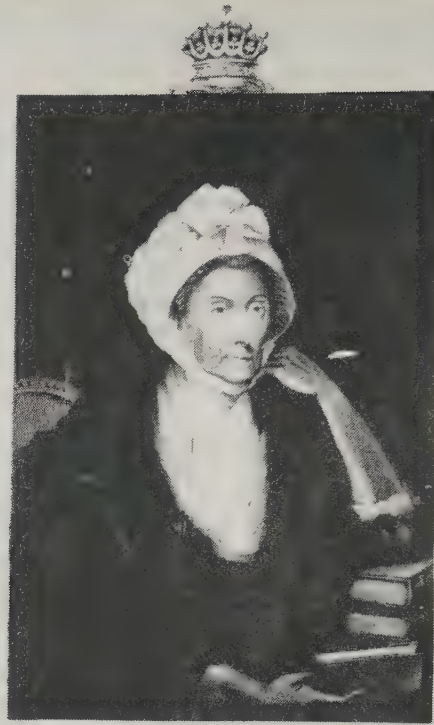
Not one single word did he utter about her marriages, so capable of misinterpretation and therefore of reproach. On the contrary he spoke admiringly of her character and conduct and patiently instructed her in the Christian way of life. It is true that her view of holiness as a state from which the wholly sanctified could not fall, he knew to be wrong and patiently explained to her. She on her part felt perfectly free to indicate possible failings in him. On each side criticism was accepted without complaint.

As in the case of other women who owed their beginnings in the Christian life to John Wesley she looked on him as a father and so continued until her death at the age of forty four.

The courtesy John showed both to Martha Thompson and Sarah Ryan was that of a man whose chivalry was roused because in both cases they had been badly treated. One suffered at the hands of ignorant people who mistook religious fervour for insanity. One suffered at the hands of a cruel and dissolute husband. Both wanted a fresh start. In both cases John Wesley made that fresh beginning possible and both Martha Thompson and Sarah Ryan proved worthy of his confidence. Martha made possible the beginning and growth of Methodism in Preston and Sarah carried out her duties most efficiently at Bristol until ill health compelled her to withdraw. Then she sustained with Sarah Crosby and Mary Bosanquet a work in Leytonstone continued later near Leeds, which has become a saga in Methodist history. Unhappily when the little community on June 7 1768 moved to Yorkshire Sarah Ryan was dangerously ill. Two months later she died and was buried in Leeds Old Churchyard. A simple sentence is graven on her tombstone,

"Sarah Ryan who lived and died a Christian".

What more could be said?



*Selina,
Countess of Huntingdon.*

In length of years no woman was more closely connected with John Wesley than Selina, Countess of Huntingdon. Their lives virtually spanned the century for whilst Selina was four years younger than John, both died in 1791. Before he set out on his life-long campaigning he was known to the Countess and when he died there was still the bond of their common interest in the spread of the Gospel.

This is not to say that their relationship remained unchanged. On the contrary there were three distinct phases. In the first flash of the Revival their association was close and friendly. In the sixties the differences in doctrine despite all attempts to minimise it began to assume larger proportions. Insensibly John Wesley and the Countess drew apart and only the mediating George Whitefield could hold the two together. In 1770 George Whitefield died, and theologically speaking the two sides drew up their battle lines. For the last twenty years of their lives John and the Countess went their separate ways. For the first ten years of that final divergence John was bitterly attacked from the pulpit and in writing from the close associates of Selina, as well as those who depended on her favours.

But this is a story that needs to be told from its beginnings. Biographers of the Countess have been careful to show that the house of Shirley to which she belonged had a centuries old genealogy and one of the branches was coeval with the period of Edward the Confessor. She herself was the grand daughter of the first Earl Ferrers and second daughter of the second Earl. She was born on August 24th 1707. When she

was twenty one years old she married the ninth Earl of Huntingdon whose family line could be traced back to the Duke of Clarence brother of Edward IV. The Earl was eleven years her senior and a man who according to the epitaph written by Lord Bolinbroke was "capable of excelling in every form of public life yet chose to appear in none". In another damning phrase the epitaph said "he looked down from higher ground on the low level of a futile corrupt generation". In a further laudatory phrase, bearing a deadly sting, Bolingbroke wrote "Despairing to do natural good he mingled as little as his rank permitted in national affairs. Home is the refuge of a wise man's life. Home was the refuge of his".

In sum it meant he was a decent, home loving man, fond of his wife and large brood of children, and quite content with his country home and estate. His virtues have to be described negatively. He did not indulge in extravagant dissipation but neither did he take part in social activity. He did not share his wife's evangelical enthusiasm but he did nothing to dissuade her from any of the work she was undertaking and her clerical friends were always graciously received at Donington Hall.

It meant that at 39 years of age Selina possessed an ancient title, a large fortune and the right to order her life and affairs as she willed. This was entirely congenial to one who knew her mind and who would not lightly brook any opposition in the pursuit of her objective. Perhaps one reason why John Wesley was never so warmly regarded as Whitefield, and never so completely within her confidence, was that George Whitefield knew the respect wholly due to a noble lady, whilst John Wesley, invariably courteous, would never give her the deferential respect to which she felt entitled. He treated her, as he would any lady, with great civility but no obsequiousness. Come to that, he was himself a gentleman of honoured ancestry, and this he knew instinctively but not self consciously.

However in the first years of the Revival there was much to overcome any clash of temperament or difference in theological convictions. Perhaps her first introduction to the evangelical preaching of the Methodists was through the Earl's sister, Lady Margaret Hastings. She listened to them gladly and especially to Benjamin Ingham whom Lady Margaret later married. Then came an illness which deepened her religious experience. Her first meeting with John Wesley is not known but as early as 1733 John Wesley had submitted



Selina, Countess of Huntingdon.

a tract on the Oxford Methodists for her criticism and she had warmly endorsed it. We hear of her later as a member of the Fetter Lane Society which she visited when she and the earl were in London. This Society was disturbed by the teaching of Molther on "Stillness". This depreciation of the "Means of grace" because of the sole necessity of waiting upon God affected even Charles Wesley himself. But the Countess vigorously shook him out of the error and she left the society with them.

In the early stages of the Revival Wesley came into the Midlands possibly at the invitation of the Countess. His diary records that he stayed with her on June 7th 1741. On June 28th at 5 p.m. he preached to a large congregation on the text, 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian'. It was a sermon he was to preach many more times before he preached it at St. Mary's, Oxford before a scandalized representation of the University life.

On this first occasion he stayed part of the evening with Lady Huntingdon. Doubtless she was the first to know of his own re-actions to the Service and the way his message had been received. He was with her on the Sunday evening of

June 28th and read the University Sermon he proposed to preach at St. Mary's, Oxford on July 25th. Tyerman's theory that this was not the sermon he first intended to preach is somewhat confirmed by the fact that after his death a sermon was found dated June 24th 1741 on the text "How is the faithful city become a harlot". This was obviously intended to be a frontal attack on the manners and morals of the University. Perhaps Wesley thought that so direct an attack would only provoke blind antagonism and so be counter-productive. It was probably this sermon based on Isaiah 1.21 which Wesley read to Lady Huntingdon and she confirmed his fears and dissuaded him from preaching it. So perhaps at her instigation he turned again to the Agrippa text of the one almost persuaded. He gave himself to the revision of the sermon in Oxford libraries especially the Bodleian. It seems very probably that indirectly Lady Huntingdon had a large part in the choice of a sermon which startled the congregation out of its normal apathy.

At this period of their lives both brothers consulted with the Countess not only about sermons but in respect of their journals. The Methodist Magazine 1798 carries a letter from John to Selina which suggests that habitually he sought her advice about the publication of the Journals and another letter would imply that Charles Wesley followed this practice. So close was their understanding in these years that when John Wesley published his 'Collection of Moral and Sacred Poems' 1744 he dedicated the book to the Rt. Hon. Countess of Huntingdon in the following words.

I inscribe these poems to you, not only because you were the occasion of their thus appearing in the world, but also because it may be an inducement to many to read them. Your name, indeed cannot excuse a bad poem; but it may recommend good ones to those who otherwise would not consider whether they were good or bad.

The most signal mark of the unclouded friendship between the Wesley brothers and the Countess is that when the first Conference met at the Foundery in 1744, the six ordained Ministers and the four lay helpers were entertained at the London residence of Lady Huntingdon at No. 13 Downing Street, (Now No. 12). She showed a marked interest in all their deliberations.

In this first period however it is by an heroic and compassionate gesture of goodwill that the Countess is best remembered. Charles Wesley records in his journal that his wife and Lady Huntingdon 'our old friend' first met on June

3rd 1751 and she “seemed taken with Sally” Indeed she said “Mrs. Wesley I will come to see you” and fixed the following day. Three years later Sarah Wesley caught the dreaded small pox. Charles Wesley wrote in his Journal (Thursday, December 6th 1753) that he came to Bristol following an urgent letter from Lady Huntingdon telling him of his wife’s grave illness.

Let him tell his own story. “I found my dearest friend on a restless bed of pain, loaded with the worst kind of the worst disease. Mrs. Vigor and Jones were ministering to her day and night. S. Burges, a most tender, skilful Christian woman, was her nurse. Dr. Middleton has been a father to her. Good Lady Huntingdon attends her constantly twice a day, having deferred her journey to her son on this account”. Her readiness to offer comfort was not forgotten when Sally recovered. She comes into a number of letters written by Charles to his wife. These speak of visits made, or instructions to Sally to visit her, when she was at Clifton.

A letter written from Deans Court February 27th 1759 informs Sally that at Lady Huntingdon’s he and his brother met “Mr. Whitefield, Romaine, Jones, Venn, Downing, Maxfield and a few sisters – and the Lord met us at His table”. There is an affectionate reference in a letter written from Moorfields (January 3rd 1760) in which he said that he dined alone “with my faithful friend and yours, Lady Huntingdon, and passed the evening with her in close conference. We could not part till past eleven. I have not had such a time this many a month”.

Apart from the happy relationship with John and Charles there were two ways in which she was of direct help in the spread of the Revival. Firstly she directly spurred on John in his campaigning and gave him helpers. When she wrote to John Wesley in May 1742 it was not only to ask him to visit Miss Cooper “dying at the Castle” but also to go and preach to “colliers in the North”. He did go north and internal evidences suggest the whole journey was in consultation with her. One sign is that John Taylor, a ‘higher servant’ of Selina and provided with a horse by her, travelled north with John.

It was this same John Taylor who when they reached Epworth stood in the Churchyard and gave notice as the people were coming out. “Mr. Wesley not being permitted to preach in the Church designs to preach here at six o’clock”. John stood on his father’s tombstone and cried “The Kingdom of Heaven is not meat and drink but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost”. But John Taylor was to know a greater

John Wesley preaching on his father’s tomb.



privilege still. On this first journey of Wesley north it was he who came with John Wesley into Newcastle. It is a marvellous story told with utmost economy of words. Tired after their long day's journey they took only a 'short refreshment' and then came straightway into the town. He was surprised by the amount of drunkenness, cursing and swearing (even from little children) which he did not remember to have heard or seen before in so short a time. He went to Sandgate "the poorest and most contemptible part of the town" and standing with John Taylor began to sing the hundredth Psalm. The three or four who came to see what was the matter soon increased to four or five hundred and Wesley concluded that before he had done preaching there were twelve to fifteen hundred present. The work so begun swelled to giant proportions and Newcastle became one of the three main foci with London and Bristol in the itinerancies of John Wesley. So the noble Lady played her part in the opening up of the North and John Taylor her manservant was a trusted companion of John Wesley in that momentous journey. He could hardly forget the letter (September 29th 1742) in which she said "Nothing less do I look for from you than making our sinful apostate Church the footstool of Christ. Attempt nothing less than all mankind; the work is nothing for our Lord. All will fall before you. I know it I am sure of it I feel no fear that you should ever depart from the simplicity of the Gospel".

What opportunities she could make for him she did with eagerness for in her own words she felt she had "a particular call to wrestle mightily with God on behalf of the whole nation". He preached at her house in Bath and London. Indeed the particular service he took at Chelsea September 7th 1748 was attended by many of the nobility and he spoke with such effect that he was led to write in his Journal, "Perhaps even the rich may be witnesses of these things". Lady Huntingdon was so impressed that she urged him to preach again and so he records in his Journal (September 9th 1748) "I took up my cross once more and came to Chelsea a little after eleven — I spoke exceeding plain from those words 'thou art not far from the Kingdom of God'".

Evidently there was a certain tension beginning to show itself in their relationship because he said that before leaving he had an opportunity of talking alone with Lady Huntingdon and that he delivered his soul, "she received it well, the tears standing in her eyes".

Then came a consequence which took him by surprise. She begged him to come again "if only for half an hour". So

on the following Sunday he returned and preached once more to a gathering which included eight listed members of the nobility. When he had finished they gathered round him 'on every side' and he was 'enabled to speak to their hearts'. The climax must have astonished Wesley himself. "They all stood without either speech or motion till Lady Thanet sank down into a chair".

The second service Lady Huntingdon rendered the good cause was to stress at a critical juncture the importance of the lay preachers in the work of the Revival. Susanna Wesley's blunt words to John Wesley on behalf of Thomas Maxfield must be set alongside the equal praise of Lady Huntingdon. She told John Wesley that she had made Maxfield expound at a Service in her residence. It was she who strongly encouraged John Nelson after hearing him preach at Birstall, and when as a pressed man unready to serve in the Army he was thrown into prison at Bradford, she was the one mainly responsible for his eventual release from Military service. In his Journal John Nelson speaks of receiving a letter from Charles Wesley in which he said that the Earl of Stair had been able to assure Lady Huntingdon that John Nelson would be set at liberty in a few days. He was as good as his word. Charles Wesley recorded in his Journal "that the answers to our prayers return thick upon us".

The sunny period of friendship was giving way to a cloudier sky by 1750. The signs at first were scarcely perceptible. Perhaps, ironic as it may seem, the change began to come with the growing ascendancy of George Whitefield over the Countess. It was in August 1747 that Whitefield preached at her London house to great nobles such as the Earl of Chesterfield and Lord Bolinbroke, and John Newton declared him to be the greatest preacher of all. "Our popular Ministers are only his copies". Shortly after, Selina made him her Chaplain and encouraged him as often as he was able to preach at her house.

Dr. Haweis who was completely in the confidence of Lady Huntingdon said of George Whitefield and John Wesley that "they Separated on doctrinal points but like Paul and Barnabas the sphere of their usefulness was enlarged". Despite the pressures of lesser men who would gladly have divided them, their friendship, though often under strain, lasted until Whitefield's death. But Selina more and more came under the influence of Whitefield both as a man and as the most popular exponent of Calvinism. His approach of warm affectionate admiration and deferential respect was



John Nelson

exactly right. But his theological views also commended themselves to one who knew of an England in which socially there were the elect and the reprobate. She therefore had no difficulty in accepting the notion of a spiritual elite. Sometimes she was called the elect Lady and that may have had both spiritual and social significance. The theological stress of Arminianism with its democratic use of the word "all" instead of the few and the many was quite distasteful to her sensitive ears.

So whilst there was no estrangement from the Wesleys she more and more used George Whitefield when he was back from his American tours. She made him her chaplain in 1748, and sought to secure through him, an evangelical awakening in the Church of England.

Much as she admired the Wesleys she realised that many of their actions were ecclesiastically irregular and therefore their work must largely lie outside the official life of the established Church. But many clergymen within the Church were caught up in the same evangelical revival and were Calvinist and not Arminian in their theology. They included such revered names as Romaine, Venn, Madan, Beveridge and Walker. Lady Huntingdon saw Whitefield as their prophetic voice. Nevertheless she strove as well as she was able to preserve harmony. In August 1766 John Wesley had written offering to preach in her chapel at Bath whilst he was in Bristol. In her reply she cordially thanked him saying "I do trust that this union which has commenced will be for the furtherance of our faith and mutual love to each other. It is for the interest of the best of causes that we should all be found, first faithful to the Lord, and then to each other". She then tells him that she has found something wanting in their relationship, and that he and Charles Wesley together with George Whitefield and herself should meet regularly to "communicate our observations upon the state of the work".



George Whitefield.

The plan came to nothing. John was quite unready to co-operate in this fashion, not because Lady Huntingdon was a woman and as strongly a leader as himself, but because he knew there was a difference of emphasis that could never be obscured. All that he would do was occasionally to preach either at the Tabernacle or Lady Huntingdon's house in Cavendish Square. However, writing to his wife (August 21st 1766), Charles Wesley did say that in London he and his brother had spent two blessed hours with George Whitefield and that on the following Tuesday John Wesley was to preach in Lady Huntingdon's chapel at Bath. Then came the astonishing sentence. "That and all her chapels (not to say, as

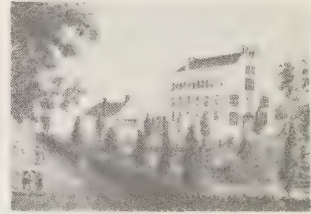
I might, herself also) are now put in the hands of us three”.

He did of course claim too much. When the Countess opened her chapels it was Whitefield whom she used to train her preachers. During all his itinerancies he spoke to these young men and so maintained some control of a movement which she subsidised and directed. Nevertheless the reference contained an undeniable truth. It was Whitefield who kept them all together.

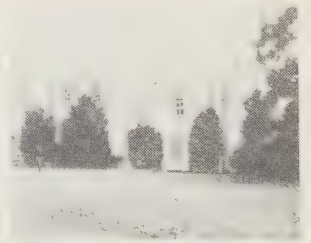
When Whitefield died in 1770 Selina was “nearly overwhelmed by her unspeakable loss”. It was Venn whom she chose to preach the memorial sermon at her chapel in Bath. Almost at once a working arrangement that had depended so much on Whitefield began to break up. John had commented a year before in a letter to Mary Bishop (November 22nd 1769) on the strange behaviour of Lady Huntingdon. “It is exceeding strange. I should really wonder (if I could wonder at any weakness of human nature) that so good a woman as Lady Huntingdon, and one who particularly prides herself on her catholic spirit, should be guilty of such narrowness of spirit. Let it teach us a bitter lesson”.

Now worse was to happen. In a letter to Joseph Benson who had left Kingswood to become headmaster of Trevecca opened by Lady Huntingdon in 1767, John Wesley spoke plainly of Selina’s obsession with her college. “Trevecca is much more to Lady Huntingdon than Kingswood is to me. It mixes with everything. It is my College, my masters, my students. I do not speak so of this school. It is not mine but the Lord’s!” He urged Benson to maintain his authority and promised to second him “to the uttermost”.

But on Whitefield’s death the promise of Wesley was of no further avail. The theological propositions approved by the 1770 Conference made Selina think that the fundamental truths of the Gospel were being denied. She determined that all who did not openly disavow them should leave her College. Joseph Benson defended them stoutly and was dismissed. He must however have been warned by Wesley’s letter. “I am glad you had the courage to speak your mind on so critical an occasion. At all hazards do so still, only with all possible tenderness and respect. She is much devoted to God and has a thousand valuable and amiable qualities. There is no great fear that I should be prejudiced against one whom I have intimately known for these thirty years. And I know what is in man, therefore I make large allowance for human weakness. But what you say is exactly the state of the case. They are ‘jealous of their authority’. Truly there is no cause”.



Kingswood School.



Trevecca College.

John Fletcher who had only recently accepted the Presidency of Trevecca likewise felt cause to resign.

If, in order, must be set down those immediate causes which brought about the third period of alienation and distrust, then it must be the death of Whitefield, and the publication of the Minutes of the 1770 Conference with their offending sections on the issue with Calvinism. Lastly, and later of greatest significance – the first of John Fletcher’s ‘Checks to Antinomianism’. This in prose was the counterpart of Charles Wesley’s poetic blasts against Calvinism. By the time Conference met in Bristol in 1771 the die had been cast. Lady Huntingdon had set up her soldiers in battle line. A wordy warfare was about to commence. The former days of friendship and understanding were over.

Her period of greatest influence ended with Whitefield’s death. Once his restraining hand was no longer upon her, she, who had received Rowland Hill “with open arms” and welcomed both Augustus Toplady and him as favoured preachers in her chapels, now surrendered wholly to their shrill Calvinism and their aggressive methods of propagating their gospel. In 1770 John Wesley was excluded from her pulpits. He had written to Selina defending the doctrinal sections of the 1770 Minutes of Conference, but the noble lady was egged on to open conflict. Even a strongly worded letter of John Fletcher the saintly vicar of Madeley, and Wesley’s designated successor, failed to move her. As President of Trevecca he wrote to her on January 1st 1771 “If every Arminian must quit the College I am actually discharged also Mr. Wesley will always be welcome in my pulpit. If your ladyship forbids your students to preach for the one and offers them to preach for the other and if a Master is discharged for saying Christ died for all, then prejudice reigns. Charity is cruelly wounded, and party spirit shouts, prevails and triumphs”.

As the time of the momentous Conference of 1771 drew near John Wesley replying to Selina, made one last appeal for charity and forbearance (June 19th 1771). He said that for thirty years he had preached the same doctrine and concluded “To be short; such as I am, I love you well. You have one of the first places in my esteem and affection. And you once had some regard for me. But it cannot continue if it depends upon my seeing with your eyes or on my being in no mistake. What, if I was in as many errors as Mr. Law himself? If you were, I should love you still, provided your heart was still right with God. My dear friend, you seem not well to have learned the meaning of these words which I desire to have

continually written on my heart, 'Whosoever doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother and sister and mother, — I am, my dear Lady Your affectionate, John Wesley'.

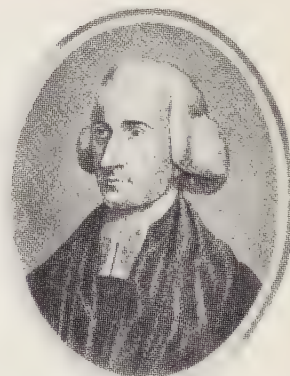
The Countess could not rise to the eirenic appeal of the letter. She was determined on battle. Before the Conference began John Fletcher wrote a vindication of the 1770 Minutes in five letters and sent the manuscript to John Wesley who immediately published them. This was Fletcher's First Check to Antinomianism. This incensed Lady Huntingdon and even more Rowland and Richard Hill and Augustus Toplady. The strategy of battle was drawn up. It was decided that Selina's cousin the Rev. and Hon. Walter Shirley should send a circular letter to a large number of Calvinist sympathisers summoning them to a meeting in Bristol at the same time as Wesley's Conference. When this Calvinist gathering met in Bristol John Wesley was asked to receive a deputation and at once agreed.

So on August 6th 1771 Walter Shirley came with nine others. With Wesley's permission he read two letters written by Lady Huntingdon and himself which had been received by Wesley the evening before Conference opened. There followed a two hour discussion, and after John Wesley commented ironically "they were satisfied that we were not so 'dreadful heretics' as they imagined, but were tolerably sound in the faith".

Conflicting reports have been given of the Conference but one indisputable fact emerges. Shirley did acknowledge publicity that he had mistaken the meaning of the Minutes. He and his friends retreated in disorder and certainly in discomfort. It can be imagined that when they reported the sorry affair to Selina she was not mollified.

It was in fact a pyrrhic victory and for the next six years Wesley was subject, in the pages of the Gospel Magazine, to the scurrilities of the brother Hill, and of Toplady. So vicious was their earlier attack that John Wesley writing on June 24th 1770 to George Merryweather said, "Mr. Augustus Toplady I know well. But I do not fight with chimney sweepers. He is too dirty a writer for me to meddle with. I should only foul my fingers. I read his title page and trouble myself no further". But after 1771 this mud-slinging knew no bounds. One of his pamphlets against John Wesley was entitled "An old fox tarred and feathered" (1775). But perhaps the most scathing attack on Wesley was Rowland Hill's 'Imposture detected and the Dead vindicated' (London 1777).

Rev. Augustus Toplady.



These writers were her co-adjutors, and plainly their written and spoken words were known and in general approved by her. Sir Richard, though not a preacher, was a doughty ultra-predestinarian controversialist and Rowland Hill his brother, though never ordained, preached extensively in all Lady Huntingdon's London chapels until at length his friends built for him the Surrey chapel at Southwark.

In this controversey, however, Lady Huntingdon played a direct part through her own preachers. She sent them not to unevangelised areas, but to the very places where the Methodist societies had taken firm root. Their avowed aim was to disrupt the Methodists by their attack on John Wesley and his doctrines. Once when Wesley came to Ormiston near Edinburgh he found that a friendly Minister had changed his mind. His patron the Earl of Hopetoun had heard from Lady Huntingdon that Methodists were dreadful heretics to whom no quarter should be given. Wesley observed in his Journal "It is a pity! Should not the children of God leave the devil to do his own work?"

The society at Norwich was gravely disturbed by the incursions of Trevecca students whom Wesley castigated as 'those vulgarly called gospel preachers'. By August 1778 however he was able to declare that peace and love prevailed throughout the circuit "Those who styled themselves My Lady's Preachers, who screamed, and railed and threatened to swallow us up, are vanished away". But in Grimsby July 3rd 1779 he had to confess "those striplings who call themselves Lady Huntingdon's preachers have greatly hindered the work of God. They have neither sense, courage, nor grace to go and beat up the devil's quarters in any place where Christ has not been named, but wherever we have entered as by storm and gathered up a few souls, often at the peril of our lives, they creep in, and, by doubtful disputations set every one's sword against his brother".

In an earlier letter to John Fletcher he had squarely set the blame on Selina herself. "The young man did act by her instructions, which I never heard she had recalled. So at present what they do is her act and deed. 'Tis well He that is higher than the highest doth regard it".

Calumny and libel slowly wore themselves out. The succession of Fletcher's Checks to Antinomianism; the universal grace stated unforgettably in the verse of Charles Wesley, and above all the strong evangelical preaching of John and his unruffled calm in the face of all slander meant that his opponents wearied themselves in vain. This did not mean that Lady Huntingdon herself changed either in the

proclamation of her views or in her colder relationship with John. It is true that in 1773 John Wesley had written to show his own friendliness towards her had not changed. "How few are now left below of those who many years ago rejoiced to see the undoubted fervour with which your Ladyship left the quiet pleasant shades to come abroad and espouse in open day the cause of a despised Saviour. What a blessing it is that His love and guardian care have preserved you from those early days in known and unknown dangers and carried you through honour and dishonour, evil report and good report". But the letter met with no responsive gestures and there is no record of further correspondence.

She continued to build her chapels. Her first chapel was built at Bristol in 1760 and shortly after, another was secured at Cathall ten miles away by the adaptation of a large family house. But it was five years later (1765) at Bath that she built a chapel second only to London chapels in its importance. Horace Walpole described it as 'very neat with Gothic windows' and was glad to note that luxury was creeping in.

There followed chapels at Tunbridge Wells and then Spa Fields Chapel in the area of Clerkenwell London. Other buildings under her patronage sprang up in various parts of the country but it was Spa Fields which occasioned the secession of her movement from the Church of England. She believed she had the entire right to nominate her own chaplains for her own buildings. The Rev. W. Sellon the incumbent of the Parish of Clerkenwell challenged this right and the ecclesiastical courts upheld his protest. She lost her suit.

It seemed to her, that secession, however regrettable, was the only alternative and in 1781 she "freed" her chapels from Anglican interference. Two of the clergy, Wills and Taylor who had supported her determined still to be her chaplains. They were compelled under the Toleration Act to take the oath of allegiance as dissenting Ministers. But other clergymen such as Romaine, Venn and Townsend felt obliged to relinquish preaching at her chapels. This meant that increasingly she was compelled to lean upon her own callow students trained at Trevecca. Her rule over those was so absolute that John Wesley writing to John Dickins (June 19th 1790) said he was surprised to hear Lady Huntingdon had forbidden preachers in her Connexion to marry.

She was not herself either a preacher or writer nor did she possess any theological acumen. Her role as Patron was to provide the money, and first through friendly clergy and her

own preachers, and latterly her preachers alone, to sustain the worship and activities. She was not a natural administrator but she knew where she wanted to go and would brook no opposition to her will.

Like Wesley she was compelled in her old age to concede that she might not last forever. It was necessary therefore to do as Wesley had done by his Deed of Declaration (1784) and set her Connexion on a legal basis. She even worked out a plan but for some reason it was never carried through. Had her trustees and Ministers been compelled to submit to a constitution the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion might not so easily have slipped into decline as the years passed by.

When she died four trustees became responsible for the chapels and houses, and the residue of her estate and effects. One of them, Lady Anne Erskine, superintended the whole and controlled the Connexion with ability and judgment until her death in 1802. The Connexion had its own hymn-book and fifteen articles of Faith as its religious basis, and from 1827 its own annual Conference. But many of the chapels seceded to Congregationalism and now the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion has less than forty chapels. The bond between them seems more to depend on property than any interwoven polity. This is natural since the Churches are closer to Congregationalism than to any other denomination.

*In 1979 the Countess of
Huntingdon's Connexion
had 28 Churches & 26
Ministers.*

In her last year the Countess lived quietly in a house adjacent to her Spa Fields Chapel. She attended the services and continued to encourage and direct her preachers throughout the Kingdom. The bitter years of controversy lay long behind her. If her way and that of John Wesley had wholly diverged there was no remaining rancour. When he died she must have known some sense of loss in the passing of one whose fluctuating association with her had lasted the whole of her public life. They had served the same Master with a similar commitment of time, money and energy. Her testimony that she had not only given herself to God but all her fortune "with the reserve that I would take with sparing hand what might be necessary for my food and raiment and the support of my children should they live to be reduced", was borne out by the extent of her benefactions and her religious enterprises.

A story is current that after Wesley's death one of Wesley's preachers visited her to tell the circumstances of his death. In particular he quoted Wesley as saying "I the chief of sinners am — but Jesus died for me". Lady Huntingdon is supposed to have been greatly moved and to have wondered

whether she had done him great injustice. Internal evidence for the visit is lacking but in essence it may well be true. Three months after John Wesley's death she herself died on June 17 1791. The tablet to her memory in the parish church of Ashby de la Zouch speaks in pedestrian style of her death at eightyfour years "after a life of exemplary usefulness". But her own simple words towards the end are far more revealing. She said "My work is done, I have nothing to do but to go to my Father".

Death does not wipe the slate clean. It is certain that in the matter of the great doctrinal dispute she was the offender and John Wesley the offended. Just as certainly she had the will, but not the vision, nor the magnanimity, nor the organising ability to accomplish the work she enterprised. Her consciousness of aristocratic lineage and wealth coupled with her unreadiness to believe she could be wrong, meant that her early friendly relations with John would undergo a sea-change. Here were two strong-minded people who were quite unwilling to give way to the other when either thought God's intention was involved.

Nevertheless in the story of the eighteenth century revival she was, however limpingly, a helper of those within the established Church who were the progenitors of the evangelical revival.

Amongst the aristocracy she was, in Chesterfield's words, "a powerful auxiliary". Unsparingly she sought to bring them to services at which they could hear George Whitefield and other evangelical clergymen preach.

From Chesterfield himself the Lord Bolingbroke and Horace Walpole she got nothing but graceful compliments, but Lords North and Dartmouth were visibly impressed and Dartmouth may even be claimed as a convert. Many noble ladies, however, were ready openly to associate themselves with Lady Huntingdon, and it was Chesterfield's own sister, Lady Gertrude Hotham who opened her house for the evangelical preachers.

Her own connexion had an undistinguished start in the raging controversy of the Seventies, but later it sustained a quiet useful work long after she herself had died. Lady Huntingdon is now an almost forgotten figure but in the record of women associated with Wesley she has her own particular place. Let the last word in her praise be spoken by Cardinal Newman. "She acted as one ought to act who consider their life a pilgrimage and not a home".

The letter illustrated here was written to Miss Patty Chapman on October 4th 1776. It tells her of Hannah Ball's work among young people in High Wycombe.

The beginning of the sentence at the top of the page is:

"I have much hope for the Rising generation in this

town than that years ago I travelled in both for
untill Christ was formed in them. five young per-
sons as I have any acquaintance with die as fools
but my faith is strengthened this week in their be-
lieve it appears to me to be the effect of the gospel
being preached & the instructions the Ladies from
time to time I find much difference when I visit
the young people & than that are older I sup-
pose there is but five in this place under twenty
but have had the preaching & I think when the
Lord is pleased to lay his hand upon them the
are not so Ignorant as the generation that went
before them. if our prayers & ears was immediates
and more we are not be the trial of our faith. you
must be like the husbandman that watcheth for the
early & latter rain "In the morning sow thy seed
and in the evening withhold not thine hand for
thou knowest not whether shall prosper & &c. &c. &c.
let us be like Habakkuk although the fig tree shall
not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the
labour of the olive shall fail, and the field shall
yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the
fold, and there shall be no herd in the stable."

THE INCOMPARABLE HANNAH

Hannah Ball may stand as representative of that select company of women who laboured with Wesley in the exhilarating but arduous work of communicating the Gospel to a largely indifferent populace. There were many such helpers, but Hannah kept a diary from 1765, and so for a quarter of a century we know of the work she did and particularly in High Wycombe. Her Memoirs reveal the ardent Christian, seeking to know more of the fulness of God's grace. Almost incidentally light is thrown on her many activities, and they show her intense regard, bordering on reverence, for John Wesley. He was sixty three when she as a woman thirty two years old first met him. This meeting was on January 7th 1765 and from 1768 they sustained a regular correspondence till he died.

From so much data certain facts emerge clearly. Her early years were marked by struggle and sorrow and disappointment. She was born on March 13th 1733 of parents in moderate circumstances, but whose resources were taxed by their large family of twelve children. Hannah was conscious of the straitened conditions at home and may not have been unduly sorry to leave at nine years and stay with an uncle and aunt at High Wycombe. Of these years we know little except that she learnt that prayer could be pleasing to God. But there was a rift in the lute, and when she was twenty one she left to be a member of a cousin's family in Hertfordshire and to share in the work of the household. In 1759 after five years of hard work she exchanged one discipline for another. Now she came back to High Wycombe and looked after her widowed brother and his four children. It was a violent thunderstorm in 1762 which made death seem horribly near and brought her to an understanding of God's mercy, followed by a great calm. "I found rest from all my fears".

She could not find from professing Christians the help she needed. She thought of going to the Methodists but recoiled from the idea because the popular impression of them was so unfavourable. She gave herself to regular periods of prayer and Bible reading, and found great ease of mind in

reading the Sermons of Thomas Walsh whose apostolic labours brought him to an early death. After this her repugnance to Methodism vanished and she longed to hear a Methodist preacher.

Then it was that she heard John Wesley (January 8th 1765) preaching at the 5 a.m. Service on strangely apposite words "O woman great is thy faith, be it unto thee even as thou wilt". The sermon so moved her that she was under "conviction of sin" for five months and then found peace and a sense of deliverance on June 3rd 1765. The three year striving to attain unclouded communion with God was over. From henceforward she only wanted to know in larger measure what she already possessed.

If she is known at all, it is as the pioneer of Sunday Schools in this country. Certainly she started her first school (1769) fourteen years before Robert Raikes in Gloucester. But he had the advantage of a weekly local newspaper, and with more resources and great publicity, was able to bring the institution under public notice. From his day must be dated the general adoption of a work started by Hannah Ball and then firmly established by himself.

She spoke of her work in one of her first letters to John Wesley (1770) "The children meet twice a week, every Sunday and Monday. They are a wild little company, but seem willing to be instructed. I labour among them, earnestly desiring to promote the interest of the Church of Christ".

In one of his letters during the following year (January 24th 1771) John Wesley gives her special encouragement in what must have seemed the unrewarding task of teaching youngsters who showed little interest. "It pleases Him sometimes to let us sow much seed before there is any fruit. But frequently much grows up upon a sudden, at a time and in a manner which we least expected".

The strange fact is that in a long and voluminous correspondence the references to her Sunday School are so meagre. In a letter written from Bristol (March 10th 1782) Wesley wanted to know what had become of "those little maidens" he trusted some would "bring forth fruit to perfection". Then he warmed to the theme and said that as she had "a peculiar love for children and a talent for assisting them" she must stir up the gift of God in her. He concluded that if she could but gain one in ten she would have a good reward for her labour. In a letter to John Fletcher (Manchester April 3rd 1785) he expressed the hope that Sunday Schools would be of great good to the nation and



*Robert Raikes and his
Sunday School.*

said they were spreading wider and wider and were likely to reach every part of the nation. In a letter to Richard Rodda (January 17th 1787) he congratulated him on setting up Sunday Schools in Chester and he declared that they would be one great means of reviving religion throughout the nation.

Four years before his death he said in a letter to Alexander Suter (London November 24th 1787) that the Sunday Schools in Bolton contained eight hundred children and were all taught freely by Methodists. "I love Sunday Schools much. They have done abundance of good. I will give you Instructions and Tokens for Children".

The next year in a letter to Duncan Wright (January 9th 1788) his praise bordered almost on extravagance. "I verily think these Sunday Schools are one of the noblest specimens of charity which have been set on foot in England since the time of William the Conqueror". When he wrote to his niece Sarah Wesley (June 30th 1788) he told her that Sunday Schools had been of great use in every part of England and if she assisted in any of them it would be a noble employment.

In a letter written from Madeley (March 24th 1790) he told Charles Atmore who had started a Sunday School at the Orphan House, Newcastle with over a thousand children and seventy teachers, that he rejoiced in what Atmore had done and that Sunday Schools were one of the best institutions seen in Europe for some centuries. He declared it would do more and more good if teachers and inspectors did their duty. On June 8th of this year he recorded in his Journal that at Newcastle-upon-Tyne he preached to the children of the Sunday School, six or seven hundred in number and there are other Journal references to John Wesley preaching to Sunday Schools at Wigan and at Monkwearmouth.

It will be noted that even in these slender references, John Wesley's interest seems to have quickened only in the eighties when the work of Raikes was making itself felt and Wesley realised the wonderful potential of this new movement. In Hannah Ball's classes the number were relatively few and the masters were paid. In the last decade of Wesley's life the preachers were beginning to sponsor the work. Numbers therefore were large and Wesley rejoiced that masters were found who were ready to teach without reward.

Yet it is to that school for children sustained by Hannah Ball at High Wycombe for so long that one must return for the first beginnings of a work that has spread across the world. Incidentally when she died her work for Sunday Schools was continued by her sister Ann who had come into a Christian



Old print of a Sunday School.



experience in 1772.

The main interest of Wesley's friendship with Hannah Ball is the insight given into the part one outstanding woman could play in the life of developing Methodist societies. She heard John Wesley whenever he came within the vicinity of High Wycombe, and one of his letters (London, January 28 1768) must have particularly pleased her. He said he had found a particular love for her since she spoke so freely to him on a particular subject, and he urged her to tell him anything that might try or trouble her. Then came those exhortations with which he so often encouraged his correspondents, men and women. "Hold fast your shield. Draw not back. Hang upon Him. Trust Him in all things . . .". She added her own comment to this epistle. "I have received a letter from dear Mr. Wesley which has very much encouraged my soul. I bless God for counting me worthy to correspond with so great and good a man".

It was from this time that he showed through his letters how much he looked upon her as a pillar of the work at High Wycombe. He said in a letter to Nancy (Ann) Bolton that he was glad she had seen Hannah Ball because "you stand in need of every help and God has favoured her with a considerable measure of the wisdom that cometh from above".

From Brecknock (August 14th 1771) he wrote Hannah a comforting letter expressing his delight that she was to remain at High Wycombe. He spoke of the large field of action there and the opportunity to use all her gifts and graces.

One great service Wesley expected from his women friends in strategic parts of the connexion was that they would be a standby to the preachers who were stationed where they lived. Thus John Wesley wrote to Hannah (December 9th 1771) about Samuel Wells who was the Assistant in the Oxfordshire Circuit, and prayed that he might be a blessing to her and to many; especially, added Wesley, if he will visit the Society from one end of the town to another. This would seem an oblique way of letting Samuel Wells know of Wesley's plan and apprising Hannah so that she could if necessary share in it and be of help to the Preacher. This would be no hardship to Hannah since her diary makes frequent references to the visitation of friends or sick people and beyond that narrow circle to any who were in need. On one occasion she visited three sailors in prison, "each deprived of a limb, apparently ignorant of the Scriptures and strangers to the God of their mercies". On another occasion she told John Wesley of her visit to the bedside of "a very wicked man, Charles Dean"

and how he and his wife and sister were led to Christ. In his reply (May 23rd 1773). Wesley thanked her for such a letter and ended with a tonic word "Chance is an empty sound. The Lord sitteth on His throne and ruleth all things well".

A little later that same year (November 18th) he wrote and asked her to prevent misunderstandings between the Assistant Preacher Mr. Sanderson and one of the laymen Bro. Westrup. She was to use her influence in bringing them together because "discipline must be kept up". Another full time preacher who came in 1774 was Joseph Bradford, and once more John Wesley, so familiar with his preacher's vagaries, besought Hannah to use every opportunity of speaking to him. He described him as plain and downright, and that obviously meant that he could be tactless and unwittingly cause trouble. But Hannah was a person of such standing and consequence in the Society that Wesley could tell her to warn Bradford gently, not to speak too fast or too loud. She was also to advise him if he did not speak sufficiently strongly about holiness.

Two months later (June 19th 1774) Wesley wrote asking Hannah to spare a few days to visit any of the neighbouring Societies. He said it would not only be a labour well bestowed but a blessing to her own soul. Evidently the next appointed Preacher was to be Bro. Wolfe because John Wesley, whose knowledge extended to the wives as well as the preachers, said "You will like Sister Wolfe. She is an amiable creature and has done good to the children here".

Perhaps the early contacts between Mr. Wolfe and Hannah were not too warm because Wesley wrote (November 28th 1774), "I think there need be no reserve between Bro. Wolfe and you!" In that same letter he indirectly charged Hannah in her pastoral work to look after two young women who had lately joined the Society and of whom he had received a good account. He wanted her to watch over them so that "they turn not again to folly". Parenthetically one can see here the astonishing information Wesley collected about his societies and his genuine pastoral care for the members.

There is a great tribute to the position and influence of Wesley's notable women in their local Societies, in a letter to Francis Wolfe (Luton January 11th 1775). Speaking of a preacher who removed Nancy Bolton from office he ejaculated "Since that madman took away her office in Witney from Nancy Bolton the Witney Society has drooped such as the Wycombe Society would if you took away Hannah Ball from them".



*The table from which
Hannah Ball taught her
Sunday School Scholars.*

In a letter that very same day to Martha Chapman at Newbury John Wesley suggested that Hannah Ball be invited to slip over for two or three days and kindle a flame among the people. From Leeds six months later (July 28th) he directed Hannah to stir up the gift in those who had been hindered from attending God's Word "lest they grow faint in their mind". Once again he was calling on her pastoral gifts so that careless drifters might be won back again.

So much was their correspondence occupied with the work of the Society that when she wrote to praise the splendid work of Mr. Valton "an indefatigable minister in the circuit", Wesley replied grimly (November 30th 1776) that this might be so but it did not alter the fact that hardly a sixth of those saved in 1762 and 1763 still remain!. He concluded that whilst all our wisdom cannot account for this, the need is always to go on.

A very important letter is dated from Bristol (March 13th 1777). John Wesley told her the time had come for a more commodious building at High Wycombe and that he would give her a plan of the building himself and she must employ whom she pleased to build it. This throws light on the way John Wesley not only knew precisely the strength of the Societies but the need either for building or enlargement. Nothing seemed to escape him and he made himself responsible for the fresh developments; just as he had no compunction in dispensing with a lawyer's tautology and writing a letter in legal language when needed, so he dispensed with an architect except on occasion for advice, and drew up the plans himself. It might well have seemed to his critics that he delegated too little to others and usurped too much authority himself. He knew the charge very well and made his own defence, and certainly no despot was ever more kindly nor paternalistic. But was it any wonder that by this stage in his ministry the preachers in writing to each other freely criticised Charles Wesley and more guardedly and more lovingly showed a little restiveness at John Wesley's own tight reins?



The clock from the Church which Hannah Ball built in High Wycombe.

The letter also shows that John Wesley was ready to place reliance on local leaders, indifferent as to whether they were men or women, provided they had shown themselves worthy of his trust. It seems remarkable even today that Wesley should so discuss the building of a new Church with a woman who was to assume main responsibility.

In a later letter expressing his sorrow at her mother's

death (February 24th 1779) John Wesley proceeded to advise her about the shape of the new Chapel and the need on further thought to reduce its dimensions. Then the glad day arrived. Hannah Ball records on November 11th 1779 "The Rev. John Wesley opened our new Chapel by preaching on 'We preach Christ crucified'. On this occasion we had a crowded and genteel audience. My heart's desire and prayer to God is that this neat and convenient house, erected to Jehovah's glory, may be an everlasting blessing to the town of Wycombe".

But new buildings do not of necessity bring fresh hearers. Hannah was disappointed that the numbers and spiritual power of the Society were not increased. In more than one letter John Wesley strove to comfort her. Part of her frustration lay in her desire to expect more of the preachers than they were able to give. The fault may not wholly have been on their side. She could seem somewhat angular in manner and blunt in speech. She said of herself "It has been my invariable rule not to talk of people's faults behind their backs, but if I spoke of them at all I preferred doing it in person". This of course was admirable in its intention, but in practice direct honesty without tact and sympathy can be wounding. In the case of George Story she may have had a good case and John Wesley could only advise her, despite his behaviour, to go straight forward. The second preacher in the circuit, Joseph Accult, was evidently an unsatisfactory preacher and he ceased his itinerancy in 1785. It must have been a comfort when John Wesley (July 12th 1781) told her that he would at the next Conference appoint two new preachers for the Oxford Circuit. Evidently they were good men because in a later letter (November 17th 1781) John bade her be comforted and assured her that the circuit had two sound preachers and two plain downright men who speak the truth from their heart. He urged her to encourage them whenever she had a suitable opportunity to preach full salvation as now attainable by faith.

Long before this time she had become a figure of dominant importance in the whole Oxfordshire area. We find Wesley the next year (December 1st 1782) urging her not only to go to Watlington but Oxford as well so that "iron might sharpen iron". She is to encourage Mr. Rhodda to believe that if he strongly and explicitly preaches Perfection he will see more and more fruit to his labours.

It would almost seem that she was to exercise a watching brief on Wesley's behalf not only amongst the people in the Societies but amongst the preachers. But Wesley, who knew



The Chapel built by Hannah Ball with help and advice from John Wesley.

Hannah Ball
her little August 2,
1748
Hannah Ball
her book ~~from~~ ^{from} her
used to look for
Hannah Ball 1748
I set this my name
for to betray the
thief that steals
my Book away
Hannah Ball
1748

Hannah Ball, her book

"I sett my name for to
Betray the thief
thatt steals my
Book away".

owned by Hannah Ball
when she was 15.

Hannah
Ball her
Book
1748
Hannah Ball
1748

his Hannah well, wanted her always to do this in a warm, friendly and constructive manner.

Actually this was in smaller measure a role he expected other women friends and helpers to play. In a revealing paragraph in his letter dated June 7th 1783 he urges her to stand her ground in a period of tension. He illustrated his point by speaking of four young women who were the chief support of their respective Societies. At Henley one of them quitted her post, and she and the Society shrank to nothing. The other three stood their ground and so therefore did the Societies at Wycombe, Watlington and Witney remain firm. Then he directly mentioned the three women concerned — Hannah Ball, Patty Chapman and Nancy Bolton. He trusted that these "dear friends" will never weary of well doing and said that though he cannot find fault in any of them, he wishes they were better acquainted with each other. It was in line with this advice that when John Wesley wrote to Nancy (Ann) Bolton (July 8th 1785) he begged her to be better acquainted with Hannah Ball and to converse with her because "she has understanding, piety and experience".

The proof that Wesley quite genuinely was interested in all his particular women friends did, as well as in their spiritual condition, is shown in a passage of Hannah's Memoirs. She had been troubled in mind and spirit and had tried to withhold this from John Wesley. But in a letter carefully noted by her, and written on April 13th 1786, John Wesley roundly turned on her and said that he was sure once she loved him, but if she did so still she would not just hint at her trouble in general terms, but would enlarge upon it and give him all the particulars. Warming to his task he asked her if she supposed his love for her had grown cold and that he was not as much interested in her happiness as he was ten years ago. Then came the direct appeal — "use me as a friend my dear sister".

Evidently one main reason for her lowness of spirit had been a failure to work happily with one of the preachers. It was in a much easier frame of mind that Wesley was able to write from Cork (May 9th 1787) that he was glad the "little contest" is over and he bids her let it die and be forgotten. He was convinced that actually there remained a good understanding between Mr. Harper and herself, and assured her that it had frequently been one of the contrivances of Satan to create suspicion between herself and the preachers.

At this period in her life Hannah was becoming increasingly unwell. In her memoir she speaks of her bodily

ailment and says it is only “partly alleviated”. In his last recorded letter to her (November 26th 1789) John Wesley spoke of her many afflictions but affirmed that God had delivered her out of them all. Nevertheless he realised how ill she was and spoke of her being a partaker of divine sufferings in order that she may know the power of His resurrection. Prophetically he bade her to look up because the prize is before us and we are on the point of meeting to part no more. And then as if in realisation that for both of them the end could not long be delayed he declared that “in time and eternity you will be united with your ever affectionate brother John Wesley”.

So much of Wesley’s correspondence with Hannah was concerned not in his encouragement of her as the great lay leader in Oxfordshire Methodism but as one who earnestly desired to be fully united with God and who wished therefore to know “the height and depth of holiness”. This was very much in accord with Wesley’s teaching and his urgent entreaty to all his helpers and correspondents. But he knew this was no mystical sense of oneness with God: In a splendid letter (December 2nd 1778) he assured her that little things contrary to our will may be great blessings. “We have need to apply a general word ‘Take up thy Cross, and follow me’ to a thousand little particulars: a smoky room, a cold morning, a rainy day, the dullness or perversness of those we are with – these and innumerable little crosses will help us onward to the Kingdom”.

Wesley was always ready to share in the trials and disappointments of his numerous women correspondents especially in affairs of the heart. On at least two occasions Hannah had the opportunity of marriage but her resolve was not to marry any one who did not share her faith. She said she desired only to do God’s will and not to take any step that was not for His glory and her own furtherance in holiness. Much later in life she was deeply affected by the death of S. Wells with whom, though not in love, she had particular affinity of spirit. John Wesley wrote to her one of his moving letters of sympathy and good will. “There is nothing strange in a particular union of spirit between two persons who truly fear God. It is not at all uncommon: With few years I have known many instances of this kind. And I see not any reason why this union should be destroyed by death. I cannot conceive it is. I have myself since her death found a wonderful union of spirit with Fanny Cooper, and have sometimes suddenly looked on one or the other side not knowing whether I should not see her. So you may remember

Mr. De Renty says to his friends 'To die is not to be lost; or union with each other shall hereafter be more complete than it can be here'. And I have heard my mother say that she had many times been 'as sensible of the presence of my grandfather as she could have been if she had seen him standing before her face'.

Hannah herself had no fear of death. In 1788 when she was very ill she actually anticipated death in the hope that it was the call to be for ever with the Lord. From now onwards she was increasingly an invalid and forced to stay at home. But she could say 'the love of God is a sweet support in pain'. In January 1792 she wrote in her diary that the Lord had permitted her to drag a weak body over the threshold of another year. But in the May she had a cerebral haemorrhage and on August 16th 1792 at the age of fifty nine years she died. She died not only in peace but in triumph. As she herself had said "a shadow cannot hurt".

She had one favourite maxim 'The copy ought to come as near the original as possible'. When one considers her work among the children, her pastoral concern for all those in sickness, age or need, and her unflagging enthusiasm for the progress of the Society at High Wycombe and in Oxfordshire, one knows that in her own case her maxim found fulfilment.

She has her own particular place in the Company of the women who helped Wesley, because in her better than any other, one can see the way in which Wesley both helped and used them. Whenever, as in the case of Hannah Ball, they had a special gift he encouraged them to put it to fullest use. He was always ready to be a confidant and to cheer or comfort or advise them as occasion demanded. Most of all he was always eager to help them in their quest for holiness. But as the master strategist directing the work of God across the whole country, he wanted women of outstanding ability, such as Hannah Ball, to be natural allies of the Preachers stationed in their area. They were not only to encourage them but also to take an active part in the fellowship and service of the Society.

It is through the life and work of Hannah Ball that one can see how all her gifts under the loving direction of her revered father in God were used. We are familiar with the six volumes of the "Lives of the early Methodist Preachers" but just as importantly in the story of the Methodist Revival we could have benefited from the Lives of the early Methodist Women. And in that number Hannah Ball has her own special niche.

End of a letter to John Wesley with Hannah Ball's signature.

Wesley's women friends were drawn from every walk of life. They ranged from those who had been domestic servants to high born ladies. Grace Murray, Sarah Ryan and Sarah Crosby were treated with the same respect and regard as Lady Huntingdon, Lady Margaret Hastings (her sister-in-law) Lady Maxwell and Lady Glenorchy. He corresponded with them and visited them as occasion offered, and in the ministry of women, members of the aristocracy, and in eighteenth century terms 'members of the labouring classes' were equally co-workers.

Mary Bosanquet was not of noble stock, but her parents were both wealthy and cultured. The Leytonstone in which she was born on September 12th 1739 was not remotely caught up in the environs of London. It was only a pretty village close to Epping Forest and from here the parents would move occasionally to spend the season in Bath. If this was not yet the fashionable rendezvous of gentry and aristocracy depicted in Jane Austen's novels, it was fast becoming the recognised place for the wealthy to take the waters and enjoy each other's company. They had no deep attachment to the Church, but in that age of rationalism they were ready to agree that the Church had its own place in the genteel scheme of living. So, Mary at least, was taught the Anglican Catechism.

Her real introduction to the Christian Faith came with a Methodist maid brought into the family household when Mary was only six, and even so had her own private religious questionings. Mary and her sister were quickly attracted to one who evidenced an enthusiasm for Christian living so



M. Fletcher

*Mary Bosanquet (Mrs.
Fletcher).*

foreign to the tone and temper of the age. The maid suffered the same summary dismissal as Martha Thompson once it was discovered that she was corrupting the girls by her overheated religious experience. But the seed had been dropped and the very next year at so slender an age as seven Mary recorded later that she suddenly felt an access of power and she cried "I do, I do rely on Jesus".

But without any sort of encouragement or outside help, how could such a mood be expected to last? She gradually lost that sense of certainty and it was not until a Mrs. Lefevre, herself a Methodist, visited the home that Mary once again began to renew her interest in the Christian faith. She may have spoken seriously to her father on these matters because the following year when she was fourteen he was very willing for her to be confirmed in St. Paul's Cathedral.

Although at that time she had not joined the Methodists she came to share their disapproval of the theatre and "fashionable diversions". So with an ultra tender conscience she told her father that she was resolved not to be conformed to the "customs, fashions or maxims of the world". He

plainly could not understand and her mother does not appear to have taken her daughter's side. Their manner of life was so plainly at variance with her own.

At the age of sixteen during the family's stay in the capital for the London season, Mary came to know Sarah Crosby who lived at Moorfields, and the friendship changed her life. She had met a gentleman of fashion who had made some advances, but marriage with an uncommitted Christian became unthinkable. She sought a life wholly devoted to God. She said "I determined not to think about a married life, for my present light was to remain single".

With what we would consider an unnatural stubbornness, she would not go with her parents to Scarborough because she refused to give an undertaking to enter into its amusements. So came the opportunity to develop her friendship with Sarah Crosby and Sarah Ryan. Henceforward the lives of the three women, all regular correspondents with John Wesley, became strangely intertwined.

Mary Bosanquet must have had not only a strong personality but an astonishing inflexibility of will. Once she had made up her mind on a course of action nothing would deter her. It is only now accepted that a girl can, without forfeit of respect, leave her parents and live in lodgings if she is able to support herself. But Mary Bosanquet did precisely that, and even gained her parents' consent. She was then only twenty one and her new two-roomed lodgings in Hoxton Square, without any lighting or heating or furnishing must have seemed in violent contrast to her lovely home in Leytonstone. Her manner of living was extremely spartan, and the entire discipline of hours and spiritual exercises, and total obedience to God's direction, was just as severe as in any religious house. She declared that plainness of dress and behaviour best become a Christian, and was the plain and modest livery of God's children, and that she was a steward who must render account of every talent, every moment of time and every penny of money.

She had a small private income and if there were two rooms there were also two beds, one for herself and one for her maid, "a good girl but dull and ignorant". For two years she struggled in these too-straitened conditions, greatly helped by the practicality of Sarah Ryan who had returned to London after a period as housekeeper in Bristol. These visits were not only of benefit to the better ordering of Mary's domestic affairs but also to the deepening of her Christian life. But her evangelical conversion came in 1762 whilst

Joseph Guildford was praying in a friend's house. When this same preacher died, May 18th 1777 John Wesley said "he was a holy man and a useful preacher. Surely never before did a man of so weak talents do so much good. He died, as he lived, in the full triumph of faith". Limited abilities he may have had, but he was directly instrumental in the conversion of one of Methodism's greatest saints. In her privately-kept Journal Mary analysed her feelings after this momentous prayer meeting with keen perception. She confessed she still had many testings but although she had not much joy she did have a solid peace. "Jesus was my all".

At this juncture in her life (1763) a house she possessed in Leytonstone close to the family home, became vacant. A legacy left to her by her grandmother enabled her not only to move in, but also adequately to furnish the house. It became a Christian community with provision for prayer and Bible study and the equipment for serving the poor and necessitous in the neighbourhood. In her Memoirs she said "we agreed to spend an hour every night in reading and prayer. The class meeting was to be on Tuesday evening and the public meeting on Thursday". She told John Wesley about her work and in his Journal (December 1st 1764) he described it as exactly *Pietas Hallensis* in miniature (This was an experiment in community living with devotional and social aspects). He added "What it will be does not yet appear". Following Wesley's own model she used it as an orphanage and school. During her five years occupancy of the house thirty five orphans were cared for. Neglected, starving, and sometimes ill, they had need to be de-loused, fed and clothed. Ann Tripp who came as governess had the responsibility for their morning and afternoon school. Then they helped in the work of the house and were in bed by 8 p.m.

As the work developed she applied to John Wesley to send a preacher. He sent Mr. Martin the very next Sunday and Mary reported that within a fortnight there were twenty five in the Society. "Four men with great sticks came one Thursday but I gave them 'Rules of the Society' which they took and then went away". The trouble however was not over, "People threw dirt at our people as they left on Sundays, and they would put their face to the window and howl like wild beasts".

Nothing, however, deterred Mary Bosanquet and the work continued to grow. From a beginning of one servant and six orphans the numbers rose to thirty five children and thirty four grown persons "though not all at one time". She had her own recipe for making the children happy. "We told

the children that the only way to be happy was to be like God, to love what He loved, and hate what He hated”.

The elder children rose between 4 and 5 a.m. and the younger ones a little later. At 6.30 all gathered for prayers, at 7 a.m. there was herb tea or milk porridge. The smaller children then went into the garden till 8 a.m. School lasted from 8 till midday. Then after walking or recreation came dinner and school was resumed between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. Then the children were occupied until supper, and after family prayers and washing all were in bed by 8 p.m. Four or five of the older girls were kept out of school in turn and helped with the cooking and house work.

Concerning the adults Mary wrote in her Memoirs “We never had more than ten grown up persons who were not invalids”.

This work, combined with provision for the poor and aged, greatly added to the expense of running the house, and one might have thought that the visit of the wealthy Miss Lewen would have been regarded by Mary Bosanquet as absolutely providential. She was so much impressed by what she saw in her stay at the house that she wanted to bequeath a large sum. To this, Mary Bosanquet with great independence of spirit objected, and eventually Miss Lewen was persuaded merely to add a codicil to her will leaving Mary £2,000 which was only a part of what she had intended. Even this weighed on Mary’s conscience because she would never have it thought that she had brought any undue influences to bear, and that she profited from another’s ill considered generosity. So she persuaded the unwilling Miss Lewen to destroy the codicil.

At this point John Wesley came into the picture. He knew Miss Lewen’s father and had spent an hour with him at Durham on April 18th 1765. Mr. Lewen had then declared that Wesley had done his daughter more good than all the physicians. Now Wesley saw him again and the bereaved father agreed to pay the legacies and on his part Wesley said “We relinquished the residue of the estate”. So wrote Wesley in his Journal, (August 11th 1767) “the harpy lawyers were happily disappointed and the design of the dying saint in some measure answered”. It is possible Mary thus received the £2,000 she had originally refused.

At this time also, through the death of her parents within a year of each other, Mary entered into a considerable income. It was this, combined with the dangerous state of Sarah Ryan’s health, which caused her to think of her future.

Without Sarah she would find it almost impossible to run the home. Supposing Sarah should die ought she to contemplate marrying John Fletcher?

So high was the regard in which John Wesley held Fletcher that he designated him as his successor. Although the mental picture of Fletcher is always that of frailty, yet in his early days in Switzerland he had been a long distance swimmer and a keen walker and climber. Indeed his ambition was to be a soldier. He came to England in 1752 at the age of twenty-three and after a period as tutor to the sons of a Mr. Hill he was ordained in the Church of England in 1757. He came into contact with Methodism the following year and thenceforward proved the closest Anglican ally of John Wesley in his work. He declined many offers of livings that were comfortable and lucrative. If he could not be a soldier he was at least determined to endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. In this respect he was so much like the woman he was later to marry. He accepted the living of Madeley Shropshire in 1760 because it seemed to offer the best prospect open to him of service. Benson in his *Life of Fletcher* speaks of it as a benighted place and remarkable for "little else than the ignorance and profaneness of its inhabitants. The Sabbath was most openly profaned and the most holy things contemptuously trampled under foot".

Here in this seemingly unattractive "populous village" Fletcher sustained a most devoted and remarkable ministry for twenty-five years, terminating only with his death in 1785. Had Mary Bosanquet turned to John Fletcher at this time she would have found a warm response. He had written to Charles Wesley to say that he had considered matrimony differently from the past and "the person who presented herself to my imagination was Mary Bosanquet".

But unhappily the marriage which would so immeasurably have added to his own comfort and the value of his work in Madeley, was to be delayed for another fourteen years. Sarah Ryan recovered and the need either for enlarging the Leytonstone home or removing elsewhere became more and more apparent. It had already been suggested to her that she should live in Yorkshire and then came Mr. Richard Tylor to clinch the matter. On the recommendation of Methodist friends he came to stay for a time at the home whilst he transacted his business affairs. But he spoke to Mary of his Yorkshire home and the attractions of that county.

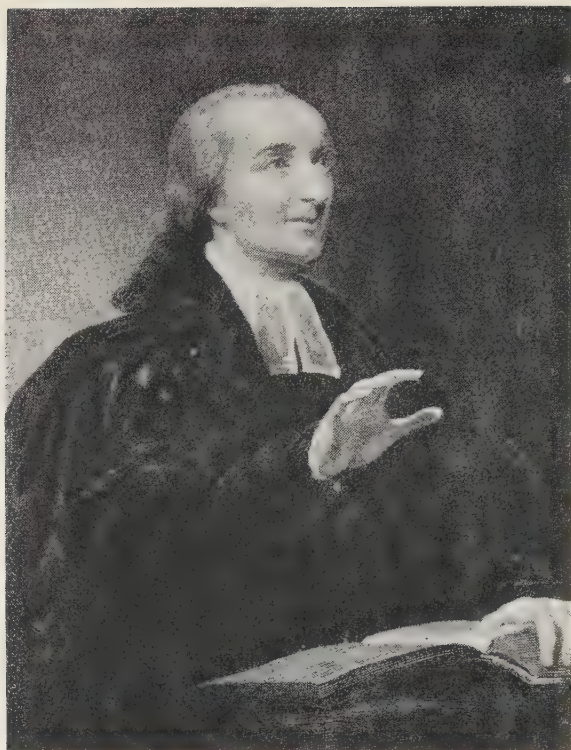
Once she became convinced that this was God's will she did not hesitate. On June 7th 1768 she moved to Leeds hoping from there to explore the country for her new home.

Already Sarah Bishop had stayed long periods in Leytonstone with her Sarah Ryan. Now all three moved to the place Mary had discovered at Cross Hall near Leeds, and two miles from Batley. The women worked in great harmony with each other. Sarah Crosby had already shown great aptitude for preaching, so much so that it raised in Wesley's mind the whole question of woman preachers and it was solved because in the course of events he found many had an 'extraordinary call' to preach and people were converted through their preaching. John Wesley did not actively encourage women to become preachers but when they did so and proved their worth, he gave them encouragement. In this respect he was a pragmatist and dealt with each case as it came along. The question of their becoming itinerant did not arise in his lifetime, but if it had he would not have judged the case on the grounds of sex, but of practical and domestic difficulties. So Sarah apart from her share in the work of the home would travel over the North Yorkshire moors and dales meeting people and holding meetings in the afternoons and evenings. In July 1774 she went with John Wesley whom she called her 'dear father in the gospel' by easy stages to Scarborough and from thence on her own, to campaign in the towns and villages beginning at Guisborough.

So Cross Hall meant for her, not only a home for work and a strict routine of religious exercises, but a headquarters for meetings and classes, and above all of personal care for people in spiritual need.

When John Wesley came to visit the family in its new home (July 7th 1770) he remarked that it was still a pattern and blessing to the country; and again when he stayed there in preparation for the Conference (July 27th 1775) he commented "How willingly could I spend the residue of a busy life in this retirement", but "man was not born in shades to lie". Five years later (April 10th 1780) he notes in his Journal that in his visit to Cross Hall he found the family much grown in grace. The reference was not so much to the women but the orphan children, and others under their care. It was on this day that Mr. Robert Roe visited Cross Hall and said that Miss Bosanquet "greatly exceeded his expectations". He declared she possessed "so much wisdom, dignity and piety joined to so much childlike simplicity I never before saw". The arrival of Wesley discomfited him until he was put at complete ease by his kindness.

Wesley, of course, was continually informed about the work by his correspondence with Mary. He wrote (January 15th 1770) advising her not to take another child until she



*Rev. John Fletcher of
Madeley.*

had cleared her expenses. He wished her to have an electrical machine because "it would prevent much pain in a family and supersede almost all other physic". A little later he is assuring Mary that it is right to pray whether we can pray or no. "God hears us even when we hardly hear ourselves".

He even wanted her to act as an unofficial book agent. In a letter written from London (October 17th 1773) he is plainly perturbed about the safety as well as the sale of his books. He tells her that if she will undertake the care of the books he will have no further concern about them because "What you do you will do in earnest". So he wishes all the books at Birstall to be moved to her house, and he even requests her to make a catalogue of them. He tells her that in future those who keep his books will be required to give a monthly account. It seems much to ask from one whose days were already crowded in a house that was at once school and orphanage, community centre, and a place of worship and fellowship. But their friendship was so deep and longstanding that he knew precisely what he could ask of her.

A month later (November 17th) he writes to tell her that the collection of books at Birstall is exceedingly imperfect and promises as soon as he received her account to send down such small books as are wanting and most sought after.

There is a cryptic reference in a letter written to her on May 29th 1775 and in it he says one of the preachers has asked his advice concerning Mary. The advice sought was obviously whether the said preacher might approach Miss Bosanquet for her hand in marriage. The only one we know, who for years had thought of her in this light was John Fletcher of Madeley, but Wesley would hardly describe him as one of the preachers. Whoever was the one concerned? Certainly Mary Bosanquet must have been more than ordinarily interested in John Wesley's stay with her which he said would be for a day or two and without any of the preachers. "I will not be in a crowd".

The very development of the work at Cross Hall brought its own financial burdens. Although from her house she, as well as Mary Crosby, continually travelled far afield either to speak at meetings, or in the open air or more usually to meet classes, there remained as a constant charge the oversight of the family at Cross Hall. In 1780 she asked in her Journal "Lord am I in my place or not?" She had no immediate answer but a conviction that if she had light and power "either to act or suffer" then God would open up the way. She thought the answer might come on June 7th 1781 which was the thirteenth anniversary of her coming to Yorkshire.

To her it must have seemed entirely providential that on the following day June 8th a letter came from John Fletcher speaking of his affection for her over twenty five years and that it had never diminished. Mary recorded her emotions on reading the letter. First was the time it came: secondly the fact that he had written on the subject after an absence of fifteen years and "without his having the most distant suspicion of my mind inclined to it". Lastly that he had the thought of union for twenty five years. She commented in her Memoirs on his unexpected recovery after a most dangerous illness. She wrote to him and he to her "with openness and freedom" until August 1st when he came to stay at Cross Hall for a month.

In his life of Mary Bosanquet, Henry Moore set down her own thoughts on the idea of marrying John Fletcher. When Mr. Taylor who had managed her affairs was found to be £600 in debt she wondered whether Mr. Fletcher was to be her deliverer. But she started away from the idea thinking it

might be a stratagem of Satan. Even so though they had not corresponded for nearly fifteen years the idea frequently returned. Then came the news of Fletcher's grave illness and she gave herself in daily prayer for him. She set down her thoughts in order. If the Lord should raise him up and bring him in safety back to England, and he should propose, could I doubt it being of God? Then she listed the following signs indicating she should marry him.

1. That Mr. Fletcher be raised up.
2. That he be brought back to England.
3. That he should write me on the subject.
4. That it should be at the end of 1781.

So when he had returned to England partially restored to health, and wrote this letter of proposal she regarded it as absolutely providential. All her "signs" had been fulfilled.

We know from a letter of Mrs. Crosby to John Wesley that during this period Mary Bosanquet sought John Wesley's advice about John Fletcher's proposal of marriage. "You approved it entirely, being persuaded it would be much to the glory of God". John Fletcher returned to Cross Hall in November for the wedding and spent the intervening days in ministering to all members of the family. It was said that he made the daily meals into a sacrament. They were married on Monday November 12th 1781 and afterwards spent much time with the rest of the company in singing and prayer. When he read the words "Husbands love your wives" he added the words "as Christ loved the Church", with the comment "My God what a task". When he read "Wives submit yourselves to your husbands" Mrs. Fletcher promptly added "as unto the Lord. And if ever I wish you to do anything otherwise, resist me with all your might".

At the society class on the following Wednesday John Fletcher opened his heart to those assembled. He said his marriage was the result of much prayer and mature deliberation "Five and twenty years ago when I first saw my dear wife, I thought if ever I married she should be the person. But she was too rich for me to think of; so I banished every thought of the kind. For many years after I had a distaste for the married life thinking it impossible to be as much devoted to God in a married as in a single life". Then he told of how his objections had been removed until "every mountain became a plain".

On December 26th of that year he speaks in a letter of his happiness. "Had I searched the three kingdoms I could not have found one brother willing to share gratis my weal and woe and labours, and complaisant enough to unite his

fortunes to mine. But God has found me a partner, a sister, a wife, to use St. Paul's language, who is not afraid to face with me the colliers and bargemen of my parish until death part us". On her part she wrote as she set out for Madeley on January 2nd 1782 "How shall I find language to express the goodness of God" and then a little later. "He is in every way suited to me — all I could wish". In a further entry she spoke of his dedicated life. "The animating example of my dear husband stirs me up much. What a spiritual life he does live. Night and day he is always on stretch for God".

It seems so great a matter for regret that these two so fitted for each other in character and disposition and complete dedication to God should have delayed their marriage so long. She could not have done her marvellous work at Leytonstone and Cross Hall but she could from the start have shared his heroic labours at Madeley, and perhaps by her devoted nursing have prolonged his life. Samuel Bradburn sometimes known as the Demosthenes of Methodism, and ever the man with a ready turn of phrase, said of their union "Such a pair, — I am inclined to think there never was a holier or happier couple since Adam ate the forbidden fruit".

She looked after him so tenderly that he was tempted to exceed his very narrow physical limits. On Christmas day 1781 he went on from service to service until later afternoon and then had to leave the Communion table to begin the evening Service. Then he went on to visit some sick people. Small wonder that in his own words "one of my old dangerous symptoms returned". However through her care he felt his health restored and said in a letter to Charles Wesley (December 19th 1782) "I have strength enough to do my parish duty without the help of a curate". Apart from the multifarious duties of the Parish he visited his Methodist Societies, and in Madeley on Sunday evenings went with a faithful Church worker to several Public Houses. But more particularly in this last period of his life he had started a Sunday School for three hundred children and now he began another school in a convenient house at Coalbrookdale on the other side of the parish. Then he drew up proposals for other Sunday Schools on the basis of teaching them reading, writing and the principles of religion. These schools were the last works he was able to do though it had been his intention to prepare some little books for the children.

The immediate cause of his death was a fever contracted through visitation of sick people. On the Sunday he insisted on preaching even though Mrs. Fletcher pressing through the crowd begged him not to continue. A neighbouring vicar the

Rev. Mr. Gilpin said "There was something in his appearance and manner that gave his word an irresistible influence on this solemn occasion". After the sermon he walked to the Communion Table and said "I am going to throw myself under the wings of the cherubim before the mercy seat".

It was only after a Service of nearly four hours duration that he came home and having eaten a little dinner fell into fitful dozing. In a letter to John Wesley Mrs. Fletcher graphically described those last days. "On Monday and Tuesday we had a little paradise together, his words were all animating and his patience beyond expression". Towards the end of Wednesday he said he had received understanding of the words God is love he could never hope to express. "It fills my heart every moment. O Polly, my dear Polly, God is love! Shout! Shout aloud! I want a gust of praise to go to the end of this earth". Then the maid came in and he said "O Sally God is love. Shout both of you! I want to hear you shout His praise".

On the Friday it was Sally who said to him, "My dear Master do you know me?" He replied "God will put His right hand under you". But she added "O dear master should you be taken away what a disconsolate creature will my poor dear mistress be". He replied "God will be her all in all".

As the end drew near on the Saturday night Mary whispered to him "My dear creature I ask not for myself. I know thy soul. But I ask for the sake of others, if Jesus be very present with thee lift up thy right hand". Immediately he did and then a second time. On the Sunday night August 14th 1785 he died "without one struggle or groan".

Mary wrote "my loss is beyond the power of words to paint. I have gone through deep waters but nothing to this. Well I want no pleasant prospect but upward, nor anything whereon to fix my hope but immortality". She said that every day she was with him she saw and loved in him the image of her Saviour and thought herself "the happiest of women in the possession of the most sympathizing and heavenly friend". She had been his wife she said for three years, nine months and two days and now "the sun of my earthly joys is set for ever. Actually she never felt the marriage was at an end because death had parted them. Long years later (November 12th 1794) she wrote "When I look back eighteen years it gives me pleasure to recollect that my dear love and I agreed that we would not limit our union by that word 'till death us do part' but we would consider our covenant as eternal".

His loss was not only felt by the bereaved people of Madeley parish, and of the Methodist society at large, but most keenly by John Wesley himself. In a remarkable tribute he said he was intimately acquainted with John Fletcher for thirty years. "I conversed with him morning, noon and night without the least reserve, during a journey of many hundred miles, and in all that time I never heard him speak one improper word nor saw him do an improper action. To conclude. Many exemplary men have I known, holy in heart and life, within fourscore years; but one equal to him I have not known; one so inwardly and outwardly devoted to God; so unblameable a character in every respect, I have not found either in Europe or America, and I scarce expect to find another such on this side eternity".

But life had to go on and Mary had to find another place in which to live. She weighed up logically the arguments against remaining in Madeley or finding a home elsewhere and decided to stay. She conducted well-attended meetings in which she would use the lives of wise and good men as a peg for hanging her own homilies. It was said that her congregations were as large after thirty years as when she first began.

Happily a friendly curate, Mr. Melville Horne, worked with her, and so the work prospered both amongst the Methodists and in the Parish. When he left to go as chaplain to Sierra Leone, the vicar showed the standing of Mary in the parish by saying he would rather Mrs. Fletcher chose one, adding that though he had many applications, she knew best because "she knows the mind of the parish better than I do". With the appointment of Mr. Walters she felt another equally congenial co-worker had been found. But although they worked well he began to feel increasingly uneasy about the union of Methodists and Anglicans in the parish and felt that they should be separated so that they moved in distinct lines. Mary Fletcher was saddened but not embittered by what she chose to call being pushed out. However Henry Moore in his 'Life of Mrs. Fletcher' said that the Methodist people who were thus compelled to become a distinct body, have not separated from the Church, but still attend Services there. Mary herself was able to record thankfully that the work goes on and "prayers are answered in the appointment of out preachers".

John Wesley longed to see more of her. As soon after Fletcher's death as October 2nd 1785 he wrote to say he thought her idea of spending more of her time in London was



*John Fletcher
as an old man.*

agreeable to God. "I never thoroughly approved of your going so far from it (i.e. Cross Hall, Yorkshire) although much good was drawn from it". Then he concluded his letter. "Should you not now consider me your first human friend? I think none has a more sincere regard for you than, my dear sister, Yours most affectionately, J.W."

He read what she had written of her husband and said nothing need be left out and only a few words omitted or altered. Then he told her he hoped to procure materials for the writing of his life (October 22nd 1785). This promise was fulfilled, and writing on December 9th 1786 he said his book on Fletcher's life was finished and that he hoped his brother would write an Elegy. Then he said that although it was right she should spend a considerable time at Madeley he did not feel she need spend all her time there. "I think you are a debtor to several other places also, particularly to London and Yorkshire. Nay, and if we live I should rejoice if you and I can contrive to be in those places at the same time; for I feel a great union of spirit with you".

If she would not come to London then he would go to Madeley even though it could only be infrequently and for short periods. On one such occasion Mary Fletcher wrote in her Journal (April 3rd 1788) "Last Friday Mr. Wesley came. It was a time of hurry but also of profit. I could not but discern great change. His soul seems far more sunk into God. Each sermon indeed was spirit and life. Speaking of the Trinity he said that if three candles were burning in a room the light was one". Visiting Madeley the following year (March 23rd 1789) John Wesley found Mrs. Fletcher better than she had been for many years. There was a previous occasion when they met. She went to Bristol in March 1787 and John Wesley recorded in his Journal that on March 8th he went on to Bristol and met Mrs. Fletcher. Two days later he had an hour's conversation with her and found her "ripening for a better world". He encouraged her to do all the good she could whilst she was in Bristol. Accordingly she met in the following week as many of the classes as her time and strength would permit. John Wesley said her words were as fire conveying both light and heat to the hearts of all who heard her. Eight days later when she spoke at a Love Feast Wesley commented on the fact that in a few years she had changed greatly for the better both in the manner, as well as the content, of her speaking. He wrote of her speaking "it is now smooth, easy, and natural, even when the sense is deep and strong".

But life was not easy for her. Her husband's death robbed

her of the old joyful vivacity. Now the Journal revealed her desire for submission and resignation and not setting “joy on a mast”. She came to see that as she was ready to abide in Jesus she would have “all in Him”. Words which steadied her were “Christ is made of God unto you wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption”.

In this frame of mind she sustained uncomplainingly the physical infirmities of later years. She still continued to speak wherever opportunity offered and she regularly met classes. At sixty nine years of age (1808) she was able to write that cold as March had been she had not missed any of her meetings — seven or eight times a week. They all, of course, involved her going on foot, but a year later despite a painful knee the story was still the same. Nor did her daily regimen alter. Always she rose after five and gave herself to devotional reading and meditation. She followed William Grimshaw of Haworth’s advice. In your first half hour, give thanks: then pray for the new day, then examine your spiritual state, and then plan for the work of the day. Meanwhile her home was always open to the Methodist preachers on their rounds.

Though she was growing weaker in strength as she came into her seventies, she persevered in her good works until the last. On October 26th 1815 the very last entry in her Journal spoke of a bad night but her consciousness of God’s presence. She said “I seem very near death but I long to fly into the arms of my beloved Lord. I feel his loving kindness surrounds me”.

Then she was confined to her house and though visitors still came she found conversation difficult. Her last words to her companion, Miss Tooth, were “Now if I can rest I will; but let our hearts be united in prayer and the Lord bless thee and me”. The next day December 9th 1815 she found what she had desired — “the opening of the everlasting doors and entrance to the King of Glory”.

The word saintly is never to be lightly used. But in her whole life there was a pattern of complete devotion to God in which she never withheld either her time or money or energy. Her incessant work for others, ranging from her care of children to her visitation of those in greatest need, and her undiminished zeal in communicating “the glad tidings of salvation” may possibly have been paralleled in early Methodism but never exceeded. She matched in goodness the saintliness of her revered husband. To think of one is to remember the other. Her memory still had power to quicken flagging spirits. With all the saints she judges the earth.



Bristol
Sept. 16. 1771

Nancy, Nancy! Why do you forget your Friends? Why do you tempt me to be angry? I tell you again, you will lose your Labour: Don't be angry at you. You are marvellously slow in writing. Come, I hope you will make me amends, (if you are not) by a long Letter.

I purpose, if God permits to be at Blairstown on Monday, Oct. 14: At Witney, on Wed^d & Thurs day; at Hill Wycombe on Friday, & at London, on Saturday.

Do not delay to write. I want to hear how you are, & what you are doing. As well as, how the work of God goes on at Witney & elsewhere! And how go on Bro: Ingers & his Wife?

Peace be multiplied upon you!

My Dear Nancy, Adieu!
JW

Letter from John Wesley
to 'Nancy' Bolton.

John Wesley wrote in so affectionate a strain to his numerous women friends that it would seem highly dangerous to speak of one who was dearer to him than any other. To avoid such a pitfall let the matter be stated negatively. None was dearer to him than Nancy (affectionately so often called Ann) Bolton. In his generous fashion John Wesley did not hesitate to use endearing expressions in writing to the large number who were his women helpers in various parts of the Kingdom. He knew that to them he was their leader in a great spiritual campaign, and a friend who was also a father in God. So, however his wife might interpret his love language, he knew that they could not possibly misunderstand, and the vindication of such confidence is that in all the voluminous correspondence there is not one instance of a female correspondent taking any liberty in writing to John.

Yet in all these artless letters in which John Wesley showed his friends how much their affection for him and their devotion to the work strengthened him in his ceaseless travels, it is perhaps to Ann more than any other that he shows a depth of affection which shapes the words he uses. She had not the outstanding gifts of Hannah Ball, nor the rounded saintliness of Mary Fletcher, but she had a remarkable affinity of spirit with John and the range of his letters brings out the depth of this relationship.

In a letter written to Ann (December 10th 1776) John Wesley goes back to the beginning of their friendship. "When I saw you first — at least the first time I talked with you — when you was little more than a child I felt an exceeding great concern for your welfare and a very tender regard for you. I cannot say that this ever decreased since. But it increased exceedingly when some years after I saw you in such distress as I had very seldom seen before. From that time I marked you out for my friend: a friend whom

Providence had prepared for me when I thought not of it, and who was thrown on me in so very peculiar a manner. I observed all the qualities which I wanted, meeting together in one person: seriousness, liveliness, sweetness; and all that springing from the true Fountain Faith that worketh. And very pleasant have you been to me at the few opportunities we have had together. I was never angry with you yet, and I believe I never shall. I always loved you and I always shall. Whether there does or does not subsist so near an intercourse as has been hitherto between you and my dear Nancy. Your affectionate brother J.W.”.

She lived with her brother Edward at Blandford Park, Witney, and they probably came to know each other first when John Wesley came to preach at Witney in January 1764. She must have formed a strong friendship to consult him about a proposal of marriage. John Wesley was hardly the best one to consult in such a situation. He did not want marriage to distract devoted women from their service to the Church. Others before Ann had consulted Wesley and always he was extremely cautious in his advice. They were not to venture on such a step unless their partner would share their religious interests. Most emphatically they were never to let themselves “be yoked with unbelievers”.

In this instance he plainly affirmed his belief in a single state as most fitting for her. “The best and most desirable thing of all is that you should live and die wholly devoted to God, waiting upon Him without distraction, serving Him without carefulness, and studying one thing — to be holy both in body and spirit, a whole burnt sacrifice of love”. It was only if such an ideal state were impossible for her, because she lacked steadiness and resolution, that she could proceed to a step which obviously for Wesley was only second best. “You may marry a man of faith and love who has a good temper and a good understanding. The temptation you are now in is perhaps the most dangerous one you ever had in your life. God deliver you from that almost certain destruction which attends being unequally yoked to an unbeliever”.

Then he asked her to visit him in London during the following month. This was not only to converse with him but others “most alive to God”. She accepted his offer and did come to London. The meeting pleased Wesley and he said in a letter (April 7th 1768) that it much increased his affection for her. The conclusion had been that she ought not to marry “one who was not what he seemed” and that if another proposal should come, Ann was again to be ready to consult

him.

But evidently Ann was, as shown in her letters, not so convinced. In time, however, it seemed the whole affair was forgotten. But evidently it still rankled in Ann's mind and she had misgivings about refusing the man. A letter from John Wesley written September 15th 1777 throws a flood of light on her confused state of mind. He began by assuring her that his regard for her had been invariable and that since her visit to London he had regarded her as "my invaluable friend" until the union of our spirits is made complete. Then he turned to the subject she had raised with him and assured her again that she had been delivered from the imminent danger of being yoked with an unbeliever.

The man may once have had the appearance of religion, but Wesley declared it was not deep and proceeded chiefly from love of Ann, and so he judged it was scarcely possible that it should be lasting. Since the man was now obviously an unbeliever Wesley wondered why Ann instead of praising God for His great deliverance was fretting and grieving because the snare was broken and "your soul taken from the net".

Then came the peremptory injunction. "My Nancy, arise and shake yourself from the dust! You have acted wisely and faithfully. God has heard your prayer. He is well pleased with the sacrifice you have made. Admit no thought to the contrary; and if one should, give no place to it, — no not for a moment. And whenever you are troubled on this or any account, what human friend can you unbosom yourself to more freely than to, my dear Nancy, Your tenderly affectionate, J.W.".

Possibly even this did not wholly settle the matter. Certainly there is a revealing paragraph in a letter written to her in May 1780. There he speaks of a preacher who sought his advice and later declared "Mr. W. has hindered me from marrying once but I am resolved he shall not hinder me again. He was as good as his word. Without asking my advice he married a woman of a thousand, who exercised him well while he lived and sent him to paradise before his time. I do not know that this is your case. But I tell you whatever rises in my mind. I only want you to attain a full reward".

Whilst he lived Ann did not marry, but in 1792 in later middle life she married Mr. Conibeer and in the absence of evidence to the contrary she made a happy choice.

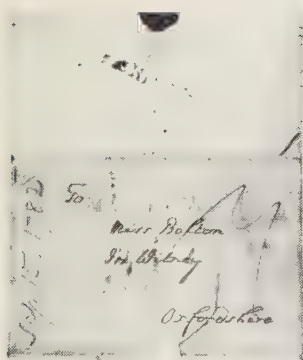
This love episode was the only cloud over a friendship

sustained far more by letters than by meeting for almost thirty years. There are three aspects worthy of remark. In the first place there is the constant encouragement he gave to her in the work at Witney. In that respect he brought Hannah Ball to help her with advice and he (December 29th 1770) recorded his pleasure at the meetings the two had enjoyed. In the following year he spoke of her pastoral work. Writing from Pembroke August 25th 1771 he said that her letter had given unspeakable satisfaction. He made warm reference to her meeting with Sister Iles whom he described as a jewel. Then he counselled her not to spend too much time at once in any company. "An hour at a time is generally enough; and if we spend more, it is less useful". Finally he warns her against works of mercy being allowed to rob her of time for private prayer.

She was able to say in a letter to him (February 13th 1772) that she was "more established in the graces of God since He had brought others to enjoy like precious faith". "Within the last four days, five have received a clear sense of God's pardoning love. The hearts of our exhorters are much enlarged". This would suggest the readiness to communicate to others what she herself had received. And no news could be more congenial to Wesley. In response to that letter (February 29th 1772) John Wesley said that whilst all her letters gave him a peculiar satisfaction this caused him an emotion difficult to repress. "I rejoice over others, but over you above all". It was in this same month (February 11th 1772) that John Wesley writing from London to Mary Stokes, counselled her — "Be a follower of Nancy Bolton as she is of Jesus Christ". When in 1774 she had to go to Tavistock he wrote urging her not to forget 'poor Witney'. He wanted her to be at full stretch. "O what a deal of work has our Lord to do on the earth. And may we be workers together with Him!"

Evidently he consulted Ann as he did Hannah Ball about Methodist preachers within their community. In this regard he wrote (November 28th 1772) about Billy Brammah and asked her whether he followed the advice given about screaming and using spirituous liquors. If that advice be disregarded then Wesley prophesied he would grow old before his time and shorten his usefulness. So he told her to drop a word whenever there was opportunity. "He enjoys a good deal of the grace of God but with a touch of enthusiasm".

Nancy replied fully to his queries and John Wesley lamented that William Brammah had not taken his advice. He told Ann to make plain to him that spirituous liquors in



dropsical disorders are deadly poison. "They lay the foundations for ten times more pain than that which they remove". She was to tell him to abstain from liquor; to eat early and have light suppers; never to sit up after ten". Then concluded Wesley blithely — "he will be as well able to preach in the morning as I am". It was a tough assignment to give to a woman in regard to a preacher.

He had good reason to be worried over the behaviour of some of his preachers. In a letter to Francis Wolfe (January 11th 1775) who laboured in the Oxfordshire Circuit with Joseph Moore he told him to watch over Moore's conduct. Then referring to Ann Bolton he remarks "she has all Hannah's grace with more sense. See that she be fully employed. You have not such another flower in all your gardens. Even Patty Chapman does not equal her".

It must be said that often Wesley's women friends, holding prominent positions in their own Societies, were subject to the jealousy of some of the Preachers, who apart from enjoying their standing and influence, may have resented their direct access to John Wesley and his regular correspondence with them. There must have been times when they would dearly have liked to know the counsel and directions he was giving them.

From her letters to John Wesley and his replies it is obvious not only that there was fluctuation in the spiritual health of the Society but that she herself was subject to moods of depression partly caused by bodily ill health. Nevertheless she pressed on with her work at Witney. At the conclusion of one letter revealing all John Wesley's affection for her and admiration for her spiritual standing he says. "How go on the little flock at Witney? How often do you visit them? Write soon and write freely". Again in 1778 (January 24th) he writes to say how glad he is that she had been kept so long at Witney "for the good of the poor people". He encouraged her to meet all the women of the Society whether in band or class.

The great man could, of course, be extraordinarily imperceptive. She had written early in 1781 to speak of her work but to confess she was often cast down. Wesley robustly replied (February 20th 1781) that he was perplexed to know why she should be depressed when "you have no husband, no children to perplex you". He failed to realise that her low spirits may in large part have been due to the fact that she had come to middle life without the strength and comfort of a husband and family.

But the good work went on and in a letter written early in 1783 Ann told John Wesley she had been learning in a school of adversity and had very little leisure time for retirement. These tidings were much to John's liking who said (January 5th 1783) "Undoubtedly you have your hands full of business; but it will not hurt you while your heart is free". He prayed for a good increase in the work at Witney and said that if they sought a whole gospel salvation God would send the answer down. In a similar vein, writing to her from Bristol (August 31st 1784) John Wesley showing his utmost sympathy with all she was doing, stressed the continued need for prayer, leaning on the word of God, and service. Then followed the memorable words "While you help others, God will help you. Perhaps it was because Wesley felt that Ann was ploughing a lonely furrow at Witney that in a letter from Dublin (July 8th 1785) he urged her to trust Hannah Ball.

So the letters went to and fro, and at the very end of his long life he was still urging her on. In one such letter (July 27th 1789) he warmly praised her work in the Circuit but urged her to do so on a regular plan and not to "ramble without any rule". Within a few months of his own death he wrote a letter (November 4th 1790) full of anxious concern because she was not meeting her classes and bands with the close regularity he would have wished. "Woman remember the faith! In the name of God, set out again and do the first works! I exhort you for my sake (who tenderly love you) for God's sake, for the sake of your own soul begin again without delay, the day after you receive this go and meet a class or a band. Sick or well — go! Go; whether you can or not, Break through! Take up your cross".

It must not be supposed that Ann was lapsing into a dangerous inertia. It was only that John expected his fellow labourers to sustain his own break-neck speed. If they appeared at all to falter he would whip them on again. It was altogether in keeping with his unquenchable enthusiasm, sustained to the very end, that at Leatherhead when he preached his last sermon the text should be "seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near". In a letter to her (January 12th 1791) only a matter of weeks before he died he was talking, apart from defective sight, of his own relatively good health and concluding "Good is the work of the Lord".

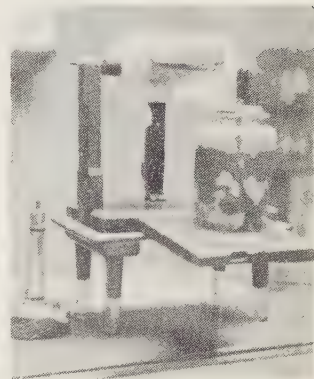
The second aspect of their friendship was his concern for her physical well-being. In this respect, of course, the

correspondence was not singular. Whether he was writing to men or women a primary interest of Wesley was in their health. Unlike the rest of us, when Wesley said "How are you" he expected a detailed reply. One tends to fly from the bore who describes his ailments, but Wesley listened eagerly and just as eagerly proffered his advice. There is one attractive, humorous reference to her health in a letter written from Otley July 1st 1772. "My dear Sister, At last I have found, what I had almost despaired of, an occasion for blaming you. You simple one! A blister! Why not a red hot iron? It would have taken off your skin sooner. I hope you tried a treacle plaster first. Otherwise I can only say that you are not as Solomon . . .". He returned again to the problem of the blister in a letter from Bristol, September 20th of the year. He writes "You have no time to lose, unless you would throw away your life, which you have no authority to do. You should have had no blister had I been near you. I judge your case to be chiefly rheumatical. Change of air is likely to do you more good than a hundred medicines. Come away, come away. Set out the very day after you receive this. You may come first to me in the Horsefair; and if need be, I can show you to Sally James! I need not tell you how welcome you will be, to my dear Nancy, Yours affectionately".

Although this particular trouble cleared up she complained to John Wesley in November of her frequent headaches. In reply he counselled her to take more exercise (November 28th 1772) and in the following January he wanted not only to know of the work of God among her neighbours but also her health. "Let me know, not more seldom than once a month (unless something extraordinary prevent) how you are yourself as to your bodily health".

Perhaps the most interesting suggestion he made about her health was to tell her at all hazards to get an electric machine. "It is your bounden duty. You are no more at liberty to throw away your health than to throw away your life". Dr. A. Wesley Hill has shown in 'John Wesley among the Physicians' that Richard Lovett and John Wesley were among the very first to use electricity in the cure of ailments, and therefore that Wesley must be regarded as a pioneer in electro-therapy. After he had read Benjamin Franklin's treatise on "Experiments and Observations on Electricity" he set down under nine headings the discoveries about electricity and commented "What an amazing scene is here opened for after ages to improve upon".

On many occasions Wesley advised his friends to try electrifying "as a cure for their complaints". But in Ann's



John Wesley's electrical machine.

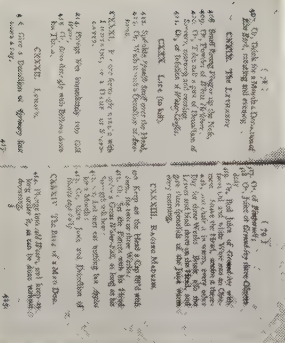
case he directed her urgently to get an electric machine. We do not know how much she benefited if the machine was secured, but certainly two years later when he asks Mr. Valton or one of the preachers to go down to the Foundry and bring "my grey horse down to Witney", he adds as a postscript to Ann, "If possible you should ride every day". This again is in accord with Wesley's advice for healthy living. "Walking" he said in his 'Primitive Physick' is the best exercise for those who are able to bear it, riding for those who are not. The open air when the weather is fine contributes much to the benefit of exercise".

On occasion however it was not his recipes he advised but the comfort and sustenance of religion. In a letter (January 14th 1780) he referred to the example of Mr. de Renty one of his favourite spiritual mentors. "I feel my pains in all their extremity. But by the grace of God I give myself up to Him and not to them". He then referred to a woman he visited in very great pain. When he saw her again the following morning and asked if she had not been in great distress she replied "I was in such distress as was ready to tear my soul and body assunder; and yet at that very time I was as happy as I could well be out of heaven". Then he concluded that he was not surprised that the trials Ann felt did not interrupt the peace of God. However in a further letter he mixed spiritual comfort with practical prescription. He told her that her sufferings could be a gift of God to her intended for her profit that she might be a partaker of God's holiness. But then he continued – "I believe volatile tincture of guaiacum would ease the pain in your face. I do not remember if I mentioned it before or no. Drop a teaspoonful on a lump of sugar and take this in a glass of fair (fresh) water four times a day. But it would be likewise well to steep your feet in warm water for some minutes before you go to bed". In his very last letter to her (January 12th 1791) he rejoiced to know that her health was better.

In all his correspondence he showed understanding and concern over his friend's ailments and not only in 'Primitive Physick', but out of the Journal and the letters, one can extract his remedies for the common complaints of his age. His advice to Ann therefore must serve as a pointer to Wesley's belief that God desires men to have bodily as well as spiritual health. If this should be denied then the affliction must be turned to spiritual profit.

A third and last aspect of Wesley's friendship with Ann was his concern for her growth in grace and in usefulness to God. This again was his constant theme with correspondents.

A page from John Wesley's 'Primitive Physick' giving some of his more bizarre remedies. The ones at the top of the page are for 'Raging madness'.



No spiritual director ever probed more tenderly nor yet more searchingly the spiritual state of those to whom he was both friend and the revered father in God. None was more swift to warn or reprove and yet none more quick to encourage in the quest for holiness.

In one letter devoted to her spiritual state (August 12th 1770) he told her that she had not yet that joy in the Holy Ghost to which she was called because her faith was weak and only as a grain of mustard seed. And then lest such strong words might discomfit her he added "Yet the Lord has done great things for you already. He has given you resignation in pain and sickness. He has made you more than conqueror even a gainer thereby. And have you not abundant reason to praise Him, to put your whole trust in Him and firmly to expect His great and precious promises?"

Again in the following year (June 8th 1771) he devoted his whole letter to her spiritual condition even disregarding opening courtesies and being with the graphic words "Woman remember the faith. It is given to you to believe in the name of the Son of God! Nay and also to suffer with Him to drink a little of the cup He drank of. O beware that you are not weary or faint in your mind! See what blessing are reserved in store for you.

What if God sees good to permit for a little season that Satan should sift you as wheat? Still you have a friend before the throne above, and He hath prayed for you that your faith fail not. You will lose nothing in the furnace but your dross. You shall be purified, not consumed. I cannot tell you how near you have been to me since I heard of your present visitation. And why should you not expect that He who loves you a thousand times more than I do will heal both soul and body together. Look for him. He is not far off! Come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly, I am, Your affectionate brother".

After he had been staying at her home in Witney on October 15th and 16th he wrote from Lynn on November 7th 1771 repeating the advice he had given her . . .

1. keep that safe which God has given you; never let slip any blessing which you have received. Regard none that tell you, 'you must lose it'. No; you never need lose one degree of love. (2) you never will, provided you are a careful steward of the manifold gifts of God. To him that hath — that is, uses what he hath — it shall be given still, and that more abundantly. Therefore (3) use your every grace. Stir up the gift of God



*Miss Anne Bolton
(Mrs Conybear)*

that is in you. Be zealous! Be active! Spare no one. Speak for God wherever you are. But meantime (4) Be humble; let all that mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus.

In the same vein, writing from Londonderry the following year (May 27th 1772) he told her she did well to tell all who are justified to hold fast all they had received. But she raised a theological issue in her letter of May 15th. She had supposed that one who is newly justified and has no desire contrary to the will of God could be told he need never feel evil more. Wesley restated her question in a less ambiguous form. It amounted to the proposition "Are we not sanctified when we are justified?" Wesley told her to get a full answer to this question "Which has perplexed so many upright souls" — in his two sermons on 'Repentance of Believers' and 'Sin in Believers'.

Actually Ann had touched on the nerve of Wesley's teaching on holiness. For him justification by faith was the only condition of the believer on first coming into the new life in Christ. Sanctification followed as the believer grew steadily in grace. So that in innumerable letters Wesley asked his correspondents whether they were growing increasingly anxious of God's gracious dealing with them, and whether they were conscious of any manifestations of this in their own experience. He wanted them to be full and yet hungry: to be at rest and yet restless: to find and still to be seeking.

He showed this most emphatically in a letter to Ann on July 1st of the same year (1772). "I am exceeding jealous over you lest you go one step too far to the right hand or to the left. You are my glory and joy (though you are nothing) and I want you to be exactly right in all things". He went on to say that he wanted nothing wrong in her temper or words or actions. So he said "Go on! Watch in all things! Be zealous for God! Continue instant in prayer! And the God of peace Himself shall sanctify you wholly and preserve you blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ".

In October (October 25th 1772) he was anxious lest she allowed herself to be beguiled by mystics such as Mme Guyon and Behmen. He begged her not to come into their secret but to keep in the plain open Bible way. "Aim at nothing higher, nothing deeper than . . . the Sermon upon the Mount . . . penetrated by humble, gentle, patient love". The high sounding or mysterious expressions used by mystics mean no more than this, argued Wesley, or if they do, then they are wrong.

The temptation of so many of his women friends was in their excess of zeal to desire either divine revelations or ecstatic spiritual states of mind. Wesley wanted to discourage them from these byways without dampening their religious faith. Thus when Ann wrote on August 5th that she wanted to attend more constantly to the divine presence in her soul, Wesley immediately recognised the danger and so he wrote (October 1st 1774) in a warning and yet a conciliatory fashion. Whilst he acknowledged that no exercise could be more profitable to the soul than that of the presence of God, there is yet the danger that a person may slide insensibly into quietism or into stoicism. In the one case a person becomes “less zealous of good works” and in the other “may suffer loss as to the love of your neighbour”. These were wise words by one who had seen too often how misdirected enthusiasm could lead a believer into false extremes.

The more human Wesley peeped out in a letter written on August 15th 1775 in which he said “I want you to be all a flame of holy love — and yet not quite to forget my dear Nancy, Yours most affectionately, John Wesley”. In the following January (25th) he expressed indirectly his fear that she might well be discouraged by the ignorance and apathy of those around her. He was ready frankly to admit that “the ignorance of Christians (so called) is indeed greater than can well be conceived. English Christians in general know no more of Christian salvation than Mahometans or Heathens. Let us impart to them all the light we can”. Then in a special word of encouragement he said “it will not all be lost labour. You have already seen some fruit, you will see more. In the morning sow thy seed and in the evening withhold not thy hand”.

He was never unwilling to chide her when he thought the occasion demanded it. In 1777 when she had complained of a sense of dereliction he told her bluntly that it was only a case of a disordered liver, “the corruptible body pressure down the soul” (April 24th).

But he was always conscious of her indifferent health and the lonely road she was travelling. Time and again he returned to the theme of trusting in God’s mercies. In one tender letter of comfort (January 2nd 1781) he answered her complaint of the evil chances that had beset her. His oft re-iterated theme that we are all under the Providence of God and that it is at once general, particular and covered, was often used by him to solace those that felt they had special and unmerited misfortunes. In this letter he desire Ann to

know the great truth that “there is no such thing as chance in the world and that fortune is only another name for Providence, only it is covered Providence. An event the cause of which does not appear we commonly say ‘comes by chance’. Oh no: it is guided by an unerring hand: it is the result of infinite wisdom and goodness”. In a word John Wesley wanted her so to accept her sufferings that she might learn and inward obedience, and what otherwise would seem ill would turn out to her eternal profit.

He was still pursuing that line of giving encouragement at the end of his life. In a letter written to her on (January 9th 1789) he referred her to a dictum of the famous mystic William Law. ‘Sir you are troubled’ said Mr. Law to me ‘because you do not understand how God is dealing with you. Perhaps if you did, it would not so well answer His design. He is teaching you to trust Him further than you can see Him’. Wesley told of that idea and urged Ann to trust God even though she cannot understand His ways. He wanted her to believe that “when the Son of Man shall come in His glory, the brightest crown will be given to the sufferers”.

In all Wesley’s correspondence with women there is perhaps an extra tone of affection in some of his letters to Ann. One must always be on one’s guard when Wesley so freely speaks of love. This was the manner of the age. After the classicism of the Augustans came the age of feeling with Laurence Sterne as a representative figure. Every man had his sentimental journey and few suffered inhibitions in expressing their emotions. So when John Wesley signs himself “Yours most affectionately” it is not to be taken with the same literalness as it would today. In any case, so very often the letter began “My dear Sister” and ended “Your affectionate brother”. Nor could letters intertwined with homily, advice and spiritual counsel be misconstrued by the women who received them.

Nevertheless they were made conscious of his lively regard for them and his constantly expressed desire that they should love him or that they should write as often as possible. He chafed if he had to wait long for their letters and on innumerable occasions he asked why they had delayed writing and kept him waiting for their reply.

Yet Ann seemed even more than others to be the recipient of his regard and admiration. In an early letter (February 4th 1769) he begged her not to send him anything and said her love was sufficient. In that same July he gave her his itinerary and said he hoped to see her and concluded “I think death



*Manor Farm, Finstock,
where Ann Bolton's
brother Edward lived, and
where Wesley preached.*

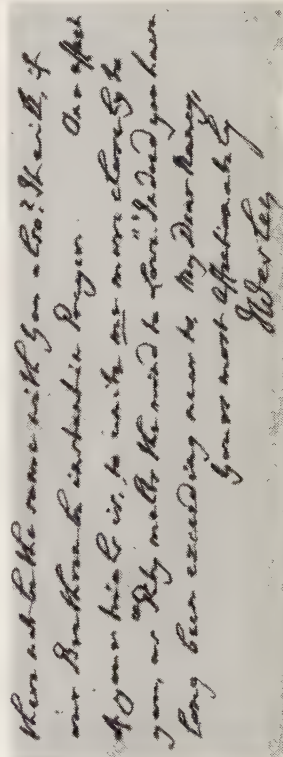
itself will not separate you from, my dear Nancy, your affectionate brother, John Wesley”.

In August, 1770 he wrote from Bristol speaking of her pleasing behaviour and her resignation in pain and sickness. He loved the way in which with her “seriousness and sweetness (are) mixed together”. Writing from Ireland (Tullamore April 15th 1771) he began by asking about her spiritual experience “Has He bruised the reasoning devil under your feet and taught you simply to hang upon Him? Are you bold, are you active in His cause?”.

But after many such questions he raised the question of her delay in writing “You did love me a little. Do you still? Do you think of me sometimes? If so, do not delay writing. Let me be a helper of your joy”. He concluded by telling her not to neglect her health. “You know not how great pain anything befalling you gives to, my Nancy, your ever affectionate brother”. A little later (September 16th 1771) the same note is sounded. “Nancy, Nancy! Why do you forget your friends? I can’t be angry at you. You are marvellously slow in writing. Come, I hope you will make amends by a long letter”. It was in 1772 (August 28th) that when John wrote to his niece Sarah, the daughter of Charles Wesley, he wanted her to form a friendship with an older dependable woman. There was just one such person whom he had in mind. He urged her to write to Nancy Bolton without delay.

After Ann had written to him early in February 1772 he replied (February 29th) by saying what joy her letter has given him. “I rejoice over others but over you above all. How unspeakably near are you to me”. But perhaps it is in his letter written from Worcester March 15th 1775 that he revealed most clearly the depth of his affection for her. “My dear sister, If I could see you, though it had been only for an hour, it would have given me a very sensible satisfaction. I cannot easily express that union of spirit which I feel whenever I think of you. There is I know not what in your whole spirit and behaviour which has always given me unspeakable pleasure; and when I look upon you (you know to whom the glory is due) I am often ready to cry out “Thou perfect pattern of true womanhood!” But I know good is the will of the Lord, therefore I am content. If it is best, I shall see my dear friend again before I take my long journey; and if I do not see you till we meet in a better world,

Surely our disembodied souls shall join
Surely my friendly shade shall mix with thine.



When shall the same will you a brother? He will, if
our Brother be interested in Prayer. Our object
of your kind is, to make me more closely to
you, as "My mother the word be love." I find you have
long been exceeding near to my dear Nancy,
your most affectionate brother
John Wesley

End of letter from John Wesley to Ann Bolton.

To die is not to be lost, but our union will be more complete in the world of spirits than it can be while we dwell in tenements of clay. Give a place in your memory and your prayers to, my dear Nancy, Your ever affectionate brother”.

On November 26th 1775 he wrote another intimate letter. “I was asked the other day ‘whether you are as lively and useful as in times past?’ I could truly say, ‘I believed you was’. And have I not good ground so to believe? I have narrowly observed you for several years; I read you over with a lover’s eye, with all the friendly jealousy I could: I have marked all your tempers and all words and actions that fall within my notice; I have carefully weighed you in the balance; and, blessed be God, I have not found you wanting”.

In a letter from Bristol (September 15th 1777) he called her his inalienable friend, and such he believed she always would be till the union of their spirits would be made complete. He returned to the same theme in a letter (December 24th 1784) “I loved you much the first time that you were with me at the Foundry. And so I have done ever since, without any intermission at all. You have therefore one friend (if no more) that has never deceived your hope, or proved to you as a staff of a broken reed; and, I trust, never will. Use me, my Nancy, on all occasions, as the friend whom God has provided for you. Perhaps as one ‘that cleaveth closer to you than a brother’ ”. Three years later (September 18th 1787) he was still affirming his love for her.

To her he was obviously a loved and treasured friend and her spiritual guide and counsellor. Although she was not one of those present at his death bed she spoke in a letter to Mrs Scudamore of the death of “our dear beloved pastor and father” and said that “when I heard the melancholy news I thought I should have died”. She even went to London, and on the night before his interment spoke of visiting Elizabeth Ritchie and meditating with her “with the dear remains” . . . “ I blessed my God for the many gracious helps I had enjoyed through him, and offered up our petitions for future mercies”.

To him she was a helper on whom he could depend for the continuance of the work at Witney. But more than that she had her own special place in the intimate company of his women friends. Her letters were a continual source of refreshment to his spirit. Even the thought of her can bring him joy. She passes without mention in any life of John Wesley, but in the final reckoning none was more dear to him than the dependable Nancy Bolton.

In the key to Marshall Claxton's painting of the death bed of Wesley Hester Ann Rogers, shown close to the head of the bed is designated "wife of James Rogers and one of the Saints of Methodism". Many of the elect ladies of Methodism who sustained John Wesley's work in so many parts of the Kingdom could lay claim to the title. But Hester was the one privileged to look after the domestic comforts of John Wesley in the last months of his life.

She was described as "a strong north country woman" when Wesley first knew her as Hester Ann Roe and wrote (May 3rd 1776) urging her to neglect no means of restoring her health, and in effect telling her to send him regular bulletins. His letters written to her that year were all solicitous of her serious state of health. So despite the editor of the Standard edition of the Journal it would seem that as a young woman she was so ill that Wesley could write. "If I durst I should earnestly desire that you might continue with us a little longer". (June 2nd 1776) However by the end of the year he could speak of the help she was giving her parent. "Everything we can do a parent we ought to do — that is, everything we can do without killing ourselves. But this we have no right to do. Do not carry a good principle too far".



John Wesley as an old man

In the following years her health greatly improved and the burden of his letters concerned her spiritual state. When he wrote to her about the outpouring of the Spirit observable in London during the early months of 1781 he told her "they could find nothing higher than pure love, on which the full assurance of hope generally attends" (April 10th 1781). Later that year (December 9th) he asked her to look after those who are "new born babes" in the Christian life, and he followed that request (January 7th 1782) by asking her always to have in readiness that little tract 'The Plain Account of Christian Perfection' so that she could stop the mouths of those who call it a new doctrine and are in fact seeking sanctification by works. In another letter (June 25th 1782) he urged her to take particular care of the children and told her that she not only had a particular affection for them but "the gift to profit them".

He met her first when he himself was old and she a young woman, but references to his health are meagre. In a letter written March 16th 1783 he warned her that he would not be able to visit Macclesfield so soon that year because he must open preaching houses at Hinckley and Nottingham which he would take on the way. Then he explained the letter was short because he had a fever such as he had a few years previously in Ireland. But he did not complain: on the contrary he said "But all is well. I am in no pain, but the wheels of life seems scarcely able to turn any longer. Yet I made a shift this morning to preach to a crowded audience, and hope to say something to them this afternoon". Five years later (May 28th 1788) came another reference to his health but pitched once more in a minor key. "The pearl on my eye is just discernible and dulls the sight a little, but not much. As it grows no worse, I do not much regard it".

However it became obvious to his Preachers and his people that his strength was diminishing even if he made so little of it. The Conference of 1790 appointed James Rogers to London so that he could accompany Wesley on his almost daily journeys and Mrs Rogers could care for the house in the City Road where there was continuous activity from early morning until ten o'clock at night. James Rogers has his place among 'Wesley's Veterans' and Wesley gave many tokens of his regard for him. One of the most moving stories of John Fletcher of Madeley is knit up with James Rogers who on his way to a new circuit in Cornwall called on the sick Fletcher taking with him two of the Bristol preachers. Fletcher was recuperating in the house of a wealthy Bristol layman and returning from a ride he met the three men and had convers-

ation with them. When the footman brought out a bottle of wine and slices of bread Fletcher called down a blessing as he handed first the bread and then the wine with the sacramental formula. "Such a sacrament" said Rogers "I never had before. That very hour more than repaid me for my whole journey from Edinburgh to Cornwall".

Later James Rogers was appointed to Macclesfield and under Wesley's instructions divided up the cumbersome circuit. A few individuals were offended "but the hearts of the people were united to the preachers". It was during this period that James Rogers' first wife died leaving him with two little boys. The following year on August 19th 1784 he married Hester Ann Roe. It proved a most happy marriage. They went to Dublin where Hester in a letter said they were gladly received and "God gave us the hearts of the people". In three years the work increased from five hundred to eleven hundred and more. Then they moved to Cork and in 1790 to their appointment in London. No stronger proof could be given of Wesley's confidence in James Rogers than the fact that in his last Will and Testament he was one of the twelve men appointed by Wesley to preach in the new Chapel in London and to be on the Committee for appointing preachers in the new Chapel at Bath. But it was not James so much as the wife he had married, which caused Wesley, acting through the Conference, to appoint him to London and to lodge in Wesley's house in the City Road.



*Hester Ann Roe
(Mrs. Rogers).*

Unhappily Hester's health proved unequal to the strain. It was a royal opportunity for Elizabeth Ritchie to help both Hester and John Wesley. Elizabeth first came to know Wesley when she was eighteen years old and he was forty nine years older. She is as much connected with Otley as Hannah Ball with High Wycombe and Nancy Bolton with Witney. It was here on June 30th 1772 that she first heard "that venerable servant of God, John Wesley". On July 2nd he went on to Parkgate and she accompanied him and Mrs. Wesley in the chaise. She said that as he walked up the hill he discoursed with her on spiritual subjects and was "as humble as a little child". This curious reference to his wife indicates that at this time she had returned to him.

Evidently Elizabeth came at one bound into his favour. Her father John Ritchie had been a native of Edinburgh and when his education was completed he served for many years in the Navy. When he retired he came to Wharfedale and married Beatrice Robins of Bramhope. They came to live in Otley and Elizabeth was born there in 1754. She admitted in

her Journal which she started when she was eighteen years old that she felt ashamed of her parents when they attended Methodist meetings. She confessed herself as "fond of cards, plays and company". But under the influence of James Illingworth the curate of Otley she became a Christian and almost immediately took a class of children. Then came the visit of John Wesley. He intreated her to be in earnest, to pray and to improve her time. He also gave her a list of books to read. She wrote that she could be "free and simple with this good man. His affability removes all restraint". As a result of this meeting she resolved to devote herself "body, soul and spirit to the Lord".

The resolve did not weaken after he had gone. On February 22nd 1773 she cried "how little time I have devoted to the service of the best of Beings". But when in that year Wesley came through Yorkshire she met him at Birstall and he enquired how she had come into the Christian life. On the Sunday she heard him preach on 'I am Thy God' and he applied the passage so powerfully that she had never known such a sabbath before. Then he came back to her house. She spoke of him as a venerable saint and how he had prayed with her.

By 4 a.m. he was on his way and left her with the injunction "See you become altogether a Christian". She recalled his "lively, forcible and interesting method of instruction" and his parental concern that she should advance to spiritual maturity.

On May 8th 1774 he wrote on his own initiative prefacing his letter by saying it was not common for him to write to any one first but only to answer those that wrote to him. Then he continued "But I willingly make an exception with regard to you. You are just rising into life, and I would fain have you not almost but altogether a Christian". He followed up the letter on June 3rd by saying that God is able and willing to give you always what He has once given, and in a further letter (June 23rd) he advised her that it was an admirable help for believers to keep together to walk hand in hand and to provoke one another to love and good works.

Once again when he made a tour of Yorkshire in 1774 she heard him preach at Tadcaster and then accompanied him to York and reached Leeds on the Wednesday. Then, she said, he preached at Wakefield and afterwards "this faithful shepherd of the sheep set out for Doncaster". She herself went on to Cross Hall and stayed for a few days with Mary Bosanquet, another previous friend of John Wesley.



*Elizabeth Ritchie
(Mrs. Mortimer).*

When she returned home to Otley on July 19th she wrote him a letter of gratitude and ended "May the Lord abundantly bless you, dear Sir, and may every purchased and promised blessing be yours for ever. So prays, Your unworthy Daughter, Elizabeth Ritchie".

In the Autumn when she was ill she wrote to Wesley for comfort and he told her it was an admirable Providence to be weak in body till the soul has received more strength. Then he enquired about her reading habits and characteristically ended by calling her to run and never tire. At the early age of twenty one she became leader of a class which in her words she felt to be "a weighty office".

As the years went on her friendship with John Wesley deepened and in his visit North she was almost always able to meet him and to accompany him for much of his journeyings. Though women such as Hannah Ball and Ann Bolton may have had greater standing in the Methodist Society as a whole, John Wesley never saw them with such regularity as he saw Elizabeth Ritchie. Indeed although he sent them his itinerary when he was in their part of the country and asked them to meet him he lamented that so often this proved impossible.

There were two main reasons for this. They were more tied than Elizabeth and their part of the country was not traversed by Wesley with the same unfailing regularity he gave to the rapidly expanding Methodist Societies of Yorkshire and the North East. In their journeyings John Wesley introduced Elizabeth to many people who became valued friends. One of them was Hester Ann Roe whom she described as a twin soul. In her Journal for May 1776 she spoke of the many places she had visited with Mr. Wesley and the many valuable opportunities for conversing with him and the physical benefit she had received from the sunshine and travel.

She was indeed at twenty three years at a danger point in what was diagnosed as consumption. A letter written to John Wesley June 24th 1777 suggested that she expected to die. "My strength is greatly decayed. I have not one anxious thought. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain". During this period of her illness John Wesley took every opportunity to visit her. No friend was more welcome. In her words "my dear and reverend father has always been to me as the immediate messenger of God and never more so than at present". When he was away from her he wanted to know in what way her illness was affecting her spiritual state.

Actually her own illness must have somewhat abated because she spoke of attending to her sick parents and in that same summer her beloved father died. The knowledge of this extra strain caused John Wesley to beg her to husband the little strength she had. "When you do all you can, you do enough".

So the friendship ran its course. When in 1786 she met Wesley in Birmingham he invited her to go with him to Madeley. There using the beginning of Revelation xiv as a text he spoke on the character of John Fletcher "the dear departed saint" with such power that Elizabeth said she and many others were greatly affected. It was at this time that she received an offer of marriage from a wealthy gunsmith, but evidently without any pressure from John Wesley, she declined it because he had "no particular conviction for God".

Once again in May 1788 she had many opportunities for conversation with John Wesley when he visited Yorkshire. After he had departed on his way to Scotland Elizabeth recorded "My many interviews with my dear father at this time have put a fresh edge on the desire of my spirit for communion with my Lord". It was at this time that she referred for the first time to a possible visit to London. The suggestion came from Wesley who wanted her to visit friends but she seized on it because she feared "my dear father will



not be lent to us much longer". So was formed a quiet resolve "to spend a month in London while he lives".

When the preparations were made she wrote to him (May 18th 1788) to say how indebted she was to God for the kind concern he had always shown in her welfare. "No situation in life will have any tendency to obliterate from my memory a due sense of the numerous and unmerited favours which for many years I have been receiving from you. Glory be to God for a friendship which eternity itself shall ripen. May the Lord reward you for all unmerited favours bestowed on Reverend and dear Sir, Your daughter".

The letter was written two months before her journey to London and when she arrived on July 17th, 1788 at 5 p.m., she was received by the Rev. and Mrs. Peard Dickenson and that same night she supped with Mr. Wesley. She said she felt at home at once and enjoyed the Conference of preachers at which she was privileged to be present. "Prayer was heard and answered for our honoured father who was divinely assisted in the performance of his arduous duties".

But although Wesley went off to visit the societies in

John Wesley's death bed.

Those who know his house in City Road will realise that it would have been impossible for all of them to have been in his room at the same time. This is a composite picture of those who visited him and was painted in 1844.

The women in the picture are (from left to right) Miss Sarah Wesley (the daughter of Charles Wesley), Mrs. Charles Wesley (kneeling on the left of the bed), Hester Ann Rogers (kneeling on the right of the bed) and Elizabeth Ritchie.

Wales Elizabeth Ritchie who had come to feel a special responsibility for looking after him as opportunity offered, returned once more to London in November 1790 after he had sent her a pressing invitation. He insisted that she should stay at the Chapel house and of course the arrangement was providential. Her intimate friend Hester Ann Rogers was too ill to fulfil the duties imposed on her in the domestic circle and Elizabeth took her place.

She summed up those last months she spent under his roof in words that graphically and movingly described the tie that bound them together. "His spirit seemed all love. I felt it a duty to let Mr. Wesley want no attention I could possibly pay him. I loved him with a grateful and affectionate regard, as given by God to be my guide, my spiritual father and my dearest friend".



John Wesley, as an old man, walking in the streets of Edinburgh.

It was a crowning mercy that at the end of his life John Wesley should be cared for by Elizabeth Ritchie who for seventeen years he had seen more than any other of his women friends and who had come to be the daughter he never had. Now still in her thirties she was at his side when he needed her most. But there is a large debt than that owed to her by the followers of John Wesley.

It is purely due to her that we have an account of Wesley's last days. His own Journal closed four months before his death and then the staccato lines of his diary continued daily until a week before his death. In those entries there were few days that did not contain a reference to Elizabeth Ritchie either in prayer, reading, or conversation. The frequent mention of her reading to him was due to Wesley's request that she "be eyes to the blind". She said she rose with pleasure about half past five o'clock and generally read to him from six till breakfast time. One such occasion he said "How good is the Lord to bring you to me when I want you most. I should wish you to be with me in my dying moments. I would have you to close my eyes". When she replied that since he led "such a flying life" she did not see how it could be done, he ended the conversation by saying "Our God does all things well, we will leave it in His hands".

In the last working week of his life he was not able to meet the Classes "but his great mind could not be employed" and he desired her to continue to read to him. On February 17th he came back from Lambeth with a heavy cold and on the Sunday he could not take his Services. But on the Monday because he felt better and was eager to carry on his work he went to Twickenham accompanied by his niece

Sarah Wesley and by Elizabeth Ritchie. On the Tuesday he preached at the City Road Chapel from a verse which meant much to him "For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith" (Galatians 5.5) Then on the Wednesday he preached his last sermon at Leatherhead giving out as his text a verse which summed up his life-long message to seek the Lord while He might be found. (Isaiah 55.6) Then he returned to London staying on the way at Balham where he wrote his famous letter to Wilberforce bidding him go forth against slavery "that execrable villany which is the scandal of religion, of England and of human nature". No letter of Wesley is better remembered.

On the Friday February 25th he returned home and from that point was under Elizabeth's constant care.

It was at the request of Dr. Whitehead, John Wesley's physician, that she wrote a narrative of those last days. After he had preached the funeral sermon at City Road he read a condensed version and later in its complete form it was sent to each of the preachers.

In her detailed account of those last hours the great moment for Elizabeth was when he was asked if he had anything to say. He tried to speak but none could understand what he said. Then he paused a little, and with his remaining strength he cried out "The best of all is, God is with us". In her picture of his dying she made it clear that like his mother before him he finished his course with joy. "We felt" she said "what was inexpressible".

Wesley once said if when he died he left ten pounds behind him he could be accounted as a thief and a robber. When his will was proved none could call him thief. Even so he was rich in friendships and amongst them the varied company of women. Santayana said that one's friends are that part of the human race with which one can be human. This is the story of the human Wesley.



John Wesley lying in state.

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THE PUBLISHERS REGRET THAT THE NEWSPAPER
QUOTATIONS ON THE BACK OF THE COVER HAVE
BEEN REVERSED, THE ONE FROM THE GUARDIAN
BEING ASCRIBED TO THE OBSERVER AND VICE
VERSA. THEY OFFER THEIR APOLOGIES TO THE
PAPERS AND THEIR REVIEWERS.

This book was completed by Maldwyn Edwards just before his death in 1974. It has been printed as a memorial to him by a few of his friends, one of whom, Kenneth Greet (President of the Conference of 1980), has written the foreword.



Maldwyn Edwards was past President of both the British and World Wesley Historical Societies and had a lifelong interest in John Wesley and the Wesley Family. It is because he knew that John Wesley's family was not limited to blood relations that he set down his researches into John Wesley's dealings with some of the many women to whom he wrote, and with whom he worked.

Maldwyn Edwards described this book as "the story of the human Wesley", but that phrase in the twentieth century can easily be misunderstood. Indeed two separate reviewers of Stanley Ayling's book JOHN WESLEY, published in 1979, made just such a mistake. The Guardian reviewer wrote:

"Wesley could exert enormous charm, and he had complicated and highly charged relations with a large number of ladies. He was, I suspect, polygamous by nature"

and the Observer reviewer wrote:

"the little man flattered women and his ignoble scrapes would today have made him a star of the News of the World".

Maldwyn Edwards' timely book is the complete answer to such suggestions.